JANUARY

Western Trails

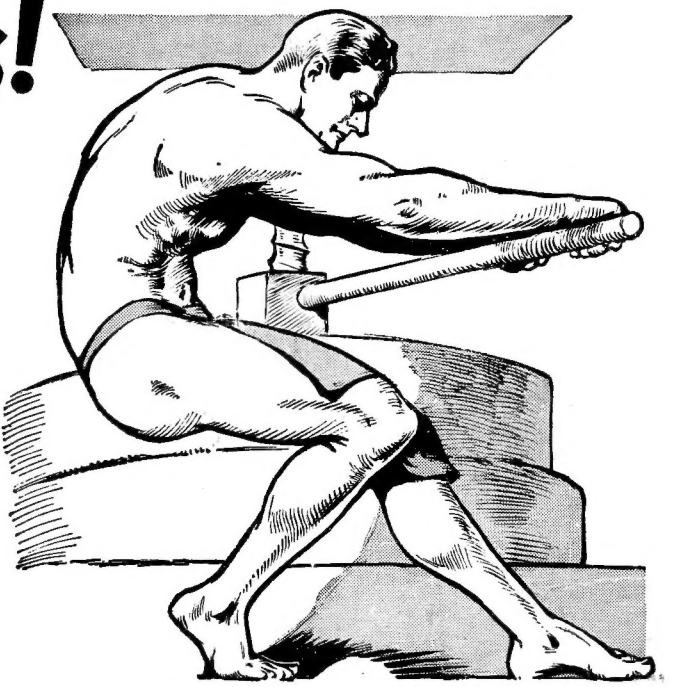
15¢

The FEAR TRAIL
Complete Action Novelet
By T. W. FORD

TRIGGER TRUMPS
"Duke Buckland" Novelet
By FREDERICK C. DAVIS

CLAN OF THE COLTMEN
"Bert Little" Novel
By CLYDE A. WARDEN

STOP YOUR Rupture Worries!

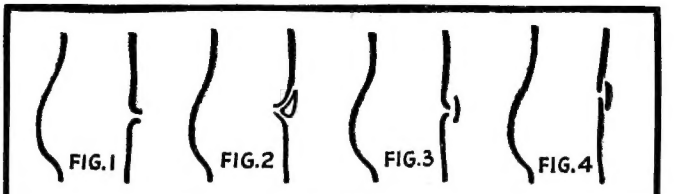


Learn About My Perfected Unique Rupture Invention!

Why worry and suffer with that rupture any longer? ***Learn now about my perfected rupture invention.*** It has brought ease, comfort, and happiness to thousands by assisting Nature in relieving and curing many cases of reducible hernia! ***You can imagine how happy*** these thousands of rupture sufferers were when they wrote me to report relief, comfort and cures! How would YOU like to be able to ***feel*** that ***same*** happiness—to sit down and write me such a message—a few months ***from today?*** Hurry—send coupon quick for Free Rupture Book, PROOF of results and invention revelation!

Mysterious-Acting Device Binds and Draws the Broken Parts Together as You Would a Broken Limb!

Surprisingly—continually—my perfected ***Automatic*** Air Cushions draw the broken parts together allowing Nature, the Great Healer, to swing into action! All the while you should experience the most ***heavenly*** comfort and security. ***Look!*** No obnoxious springs or pads or metal girdles! ***No*** salves or plasters! My ***complete*** appliance is feather-lite, durable, invisible, sanitary and ***CHEAP IN PRICE!*** Wouldn't YOU like to say "good-bye" to rupture worries and "hello" to NEW freedom . . . NEW glory in living . . . NEW happiness—with the help of Mother Nature and my ***mysterious-acting*** Air Cushion Appliances?



Shows rupture before *old-style* truss was applied.

Shows old-style truss in place. The walls of wound cannot come together. A cure is improbable.

Shows rupture before Automatic Air Cushion is in place.

Shows perfected invention in place. *Note* how edges are drawn together in *normal position.*

Rupture Book FREE!

CONFIDENTIAL COUPON for RUPTURE SUFFERERS

H. C. Brooks,
167 A State St., Marshall, Mich.

Rush me your new Free Book, amazing rupture method revelation, proof of results, **all without obligation,** and in plain, sealed envelope.

C. E. BROOKS
Inventor

Name _____

St. _____

City _____ *State* _____

State whether for man, ☐ *woman* ☐ *or child* ☐

PROOF!

Reports on Reducible Rupture Cases

"LIFTS 400 LBS.!"

"Have no further use for your Appliance as I'm O. K. Wore it a year. I now can lift 400 lbs.. without any fear."—John L. Heiges, 635 W. Locust St., York, Pa.

"CAN RUN UP HILL"

"I had a rupture about 14 years, then wore your Appliance for 3. It is about a year since I threw it away. I feel fine, gaining weight nicely. I can run up and down hill which I never could before." — Mr. J. Soederstrom, 2909 Trowbridge Ave., Cleveland, O.

Sent On Trial!

My invention is never sold in stores nor by agents. Beware of imitations! You can get it only from my U. S. factories or from my 33 foreign offices! *And I'll send it to you on trial.* If you don't like it—if it doesn't "work"—it costs you NOTHING. But don't buy now. Get the facts about it FIRST! Write me today. I'll answer in plain, sealed envelope with amazing information *free.* Stop Your Rupture Worries; *send coupon!*

BROOKS APPLIANCE CO.
167-A State St. Marshall, Mich.

...."I have REDUCED MY WAIST EIGHT INCHES WITH THE WEIL BELT!"

...writes George Bailey

"LOST 50 POUNDS" says W. T. Anderson . . . "My waist is 8 inches smaller" writes W. L. McGinnis . . . "Felt like a new man" claims Fred Wolf . . . "Wouldn't sell my belt for $100" writes C. W. Higbee.

■ So many wearers are delighted with the results obained with the Weil Belt that we want you to test it for ten days at our expense!

REDUCE YOUR WAIST 3 INCHES IN 10 DAYS

. . . or it won't cost you a penny!

■ Because we have done this for thousands of others...because *we know* we can do as much for you...we dare to make this unconditional offer!

■ You will appear much slimmer at once, and in 10 short days your waistline will actually be 3 inches smaller... three inches of fat gone...or it won't cost you one cent.

IT IS THE MASSAGE-LIKE ACTION THAT DOES IT!

■ Now there is an easy way to reduce without exercise, diet or drugs. The Weil Health Belt exerts a massage-like action that removes fat with every move you make.

■ It supports the sagging muscles of the abdomen and quickly gives you an erect, athletic carriage. Many enthusiastic wearers write that it not only reduces fat but it also supports the abdominal walls and keeps the digestive organs in place...that they are no longer fatigued...and that it greatly increases their endurance. You will be more than delighted with the great improvement in your appearance.

NO DRUGS, NO DIETS, NO EXERCISES

■ For 12 years the Weil Belt has been accepted as ideal for reducing by men in all walks of life...from business men and office workers who find that it removes cumbersome fat with every movement . . . to active outdoor men who like the feeling of protection it gives.

"I suddenly realized that I had become a fat man". The boys kidded me about my big "paunch".
At parties I learned that I had become a "wall flower". Nobody wanted to dance with me.
In a bathing suit . . . I was immense. The day I heard some children laugh at me I decided to get a Weil Belt.
What a change! I looked 3 inches slimmer at once and soon I had actually taken EIGHT INCHES off my waist . . . and 20 pounds off my weight!
It seemed to support the abdominal walls and keep the digestive organs in place . . . and best of all, I became acceptable for insurance!
I have a new feeling of energy and pep . . . work better, eat better, play better . . . I didn't realize how much I was missing!

DON'T WAIT . . . FAT IS DANGEROUS!

Fat is not only unbecoming, but it also endangers your health. Insurance companies know the danger of fat accummulations. The best medical authorities warn against obesity, so don't wait any longer.

■ *Remember this*...either you take off 3 inches of fat in 10 days or it won't cost one penny! Even the postage you pay to return the package will be refunded!

SEND FOR 10 DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

THE WEIL COMPANY, INC.
261 HILL ST., NEW HAVEN, CONN.

Gentlemen: Send me FREE, your illustrated folder describing The Weil Belt and giving full details of your 10 day FREE trial offer and Unconditional Guarantee!

*Name*_____

*Address*_____

*City*_____ *State*_____

Use coupon or send name and address on penny postcard

ACTION! ADVENTURE! ROMANCE!

Western Trails

A. A. WYN, Editor — HARRY WIDMER, Associate Editor

VOL. XVIII — JANUARY, 1935 — No. 4

Ten Thousand More Words in This Issue!

Every Story Complete—No Serials!

THE FEAR TRAIL ("Don Diego" Novel) . . . . . **T. W. Ford** **10**

The Hotel of the Damned sent invitations to a square-shooting Texan, a chicken-livered gun-wizard, and a treacherous breed knifeman. But along that fear trail came an uninvited guest—Don Diego, the bes' dam' caballero, the greatest fighter, and the biggest liar in all Mexico.

BRONC BAIT . . . . . **Joe Archibald** **37**

Brick Masson had good reason to remember that black horse, and its slit-eyed rider. Those memories were ripped out of the past by a bolt of gun thunder.

CLAN OF THE COLTMEN ("Bert Little" Novel) . **Clyde A. Warden** **46**

A young girl with a pretty face, and a strong man with a coward's heart, led Bert Little, border trigger-tamer, into the vicious trap of the Coltmen's clan.

UNDER THE SAME BRAND **71**

Trails to the best Detective and Flying stories.

TRIGGER TRUMPS ("Duke Buckland" Novelet) . **Frederick C. Davis** **72**

Duke Buckland, ace of the owl-hoot, swore an oath to pay a debt—pay in lead. But his life turned bitter, when he learned that he had made a promise he couldn't keep.

The February Roundup of WESTERN TRAILS **95**

HELLION'S LAW (Novelet) . . . . . **Robert E. Mahaffay** **96**

Stub Sheridan fell in a crash of gunfire. He was packing loot that blazed the trail to a cottonwood gallows. But instead of a hangman's noose, he was roped into a strange bargain.

STAMPEDE . . . . . **Powder River Bill** **118**

Where the reading and writing waddies fan their tongues.

Cover by Delos Palmer, Jr.

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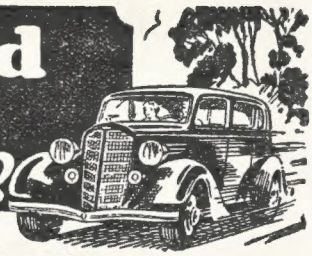
Can You Find 10 Faces IN THE PICTURE BELOW?



Answer Quick! Get the Opportunity to . . .

Win $2,250.00

or Buick Sedan and $1,250.00 Cash!

Here's a lot of cash for someone. Would you like to have it? We are going to pay over **$5,000.00 in big cash prizes.** Can you find ten of the hidden faces in the picture? Look sharply and mark the faces you find. Then fill in the coupon, mail quick, and **you will receive opportunity to win as much as $2,250.00.** Some one, maybe you, will receive a new Buick Sedan and if prompt, $1,250.00 cash extra or, if all cash is preferred, $2,250.00.

Surely you would like to have this magnifi ent prize. It would come in pretty handy right now, wouldn't it?

We want people everywhere to have the opportunity to share in this great distribution of money. This is our unique way of advertising. Besides the First Grand Prize of **$2,250.00** including promptness, there are 100 other big, grand prizes. The Second Grand Prize is a DeLuxe Chevrolet Master 6 Sedan or **$750.00** cash. Third Grand Prize is DeLuxe Ford V-8 Sedan or **$600.00** cash. Fourth Grand Prize is **$150.00** cash, and many others. Thousands of dollars in special cash rewards. **Mail your answer on the coupon today.**

Send No Money—Just Mail Coupon

Study the picture of the country road and see if you can find ten of the hidden faces. Sharp eyes may find them. Some of them look straight at you, some are upside down, others are sidewise. Look for them in the clouds, tree, around the dog's legs, in the bushes, etc.. It is not as easy as some people may think. Don't give up—keep looking and you may find them.

Hurry—mark the faces you find. This gives you the opportunity to win $2,250.00. **Send your answer quick. Don't delay. Mail your answer today.**

$1,250.00 EXTRA

Send answer quick and we will tell how the winner can get $1,250.00 extra cash

FOR PROMPTNESS

PRIZE MONEY NOW IN BANK

Sophie A. Griesser
Pennsylvania

This Company is reliable. We belong to the Chamber of Commerce of Des Moines. We bank at one of the largest banks in the state of Iowa,—the Central National Bank. The money to pay all of the prizes is already on **special deposit** in this **big strong Des Moines Bank** for that purpose. When you send in the coupon we will send you a picture of prize checks recently cashed by many happy winners. Mrs. Sophie Griesser won $4910.00 recently. Mrs. Georgia A. Johns, Kentucky, won $1,987.50; G. Giebink, Michigan, won $975.00; Edna Mahoney, Illinois, won $500.00.

You cannot lose anything. Send in this coupon and we will give you the opportunity to win the $2,250.00 First Grand Prize. Don't put it off until tomorrow. It may be too late. **Do it today--Right Now!**

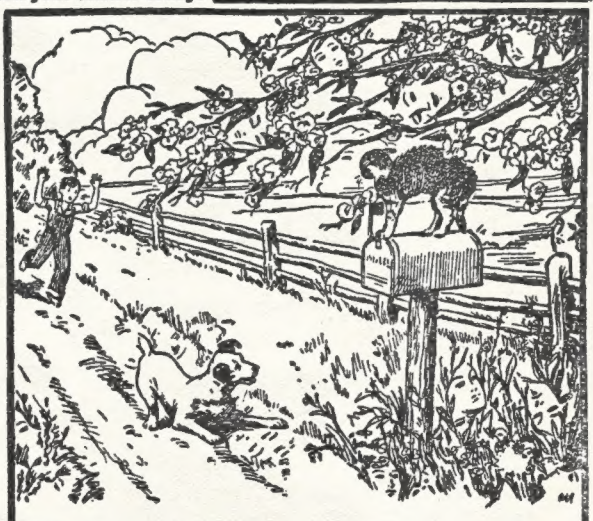
SEND ANSWER QUICK

Remember, **send not one penny** with your answer. **All you do now is to find ten faces** if you can and mail the coupon. Send answer right away.

Three prominent Des Moines businessmen will see that the prizes are awarded honestly and promptly. Get your share of the $5,000.00 in cash prizes, besides thousands of dollars in special cash rewards. Over 100 prizes in all.

Hurry! Just mark the faces you find and send with the coupon right away. This gives you the opportunity to win $2,250.00 First Grand Prize. Someone wins. Maybe you. Mail your answer quick. **Don't delay. Do it today.**

PARAMOUNT PRODUCTS CO.
Dept. 101 **Des Moines, Iowa**



Dept. 101 I found_____ faces.

My Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____

NEVER

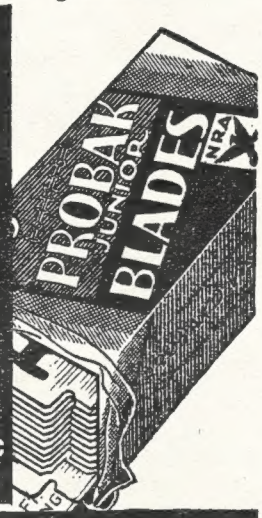
BEFORE SUCH A SMOOTH SHAVING BLADE

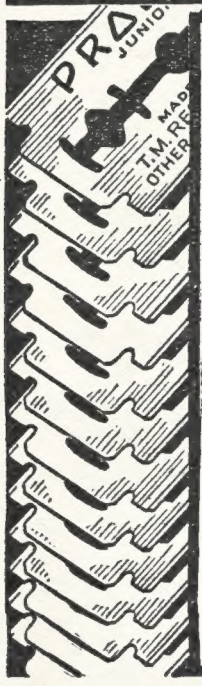
at this low price!

NOW! PROBAK JUNIOR

25 blades for 59¢

Also Trial Package of 4 Blades For 10c At Your Dealer





"GENTLEMEN:

"During the past few years I've been driven because of necessity into the lower-priced razor blades—my beard suffering because of the shortcomings of my pocket-book. Your Probak Jr. has brought back shaving comfort at no extra cost.

"Sincerely yours,
E. Eugene Leonhart,
San Jose, Calif."

Unsolicited letters like this prove the amazing quality of Probak Jr. Try this remarkable blade—uniformly keen and smooth-shaving. Get Probak Jr. from your nearest dealer's—a remarkable value at 25 blades for only 59¢ or a special trial package of 4 for 10¢.

Probak Junior fits all Gillette and Probak razors

ATLAS SAVED US 50% ON OUR TIRES
AND THEY ARE GUARANTEED FOR A WHOLE YEAR!
12 MONTH WRITTEN GUARANTY ...BOND... WITH EACH TIRE
SAVE ON TIRES
GOODYEAR
Firestone · Goodrich · U.S. AND OTHERS
$2.15
29x4.40-21
$2.45
28x4.75-19
ATLAS SUPER VALUES
This old reliable company is first choice with thousands of motorists who demand highest quality at lowest cost. Actual tests on rough-cut roads prove that standard brand tires reconstructed by the scientific Atlas process deliver 50 to 60% more service. Order today, save money.
FREE WITH EACH TWO TIRES
TUBE. Brand new guaranteed heavy duty circular molded tube made of finest heat-resisting red rubber — or genuine Burgess lantern complete; throws 600 ft. beam; adjustable for spot-light or flood-light.
BALLOON TIRES
Size Rim Tires Tubes
29x4.40-21 $2.15 $0.85
29x4.50-20 2.35 0.85
30x4.50-21 2.40 0.85
28x4.75-19 2.45 0.95
29x4.75-20 2.50 0.95
29x5.00-19 2.85 1.05
30x5.00-20 2.85 1.05
28x5.25-18 2.90 1.15
29x5.25-19 2.95 1.15
30x5.25-20 2.95 1.15
31x5.25-21 3.25 1.15
28x5.50-19 3.35 1.15
29x5.50-19 3.35 1.15
30x5.00-18 3.40 1.15
31x5.00-19 3.40 1.15
32x6.00-20 3.45 1.25
33x6.00-21 3.65 1.25
32x6.50-20 3.75 1.35
TRUCK BALLOONS
Size Tires Tubes
6.00-20 $3.75 $1.65
7.00-20 5.95 2.95
7.50-20 6.95 3.75
REG. CORD TIRES
Size Tires Tubes
30x3 $2.25 $0.65
30x3½ 2.35 0.75
31x4 2.95 0.85
32x4 2.95 0.85
33x4 2.98 0.85
32x4½ 3.35 1.15
33x4½ 3.45 1.15
34x4½ 3.48 1.15
30x6 3.63 1.35
33x6 3.75 1.45
TRUCK TIRES
Size Tires Tubes
30x5 $4.25 $1.95
32x6—8-ply 6.95 2.75
32x6 10-ply 7.95 2.75
34x7 9.95 3.25
40x8 13.25 4.15
— All Other Sizes —
ALL TUBES NEW GUARANTEED
DEALERS WANTED
Send $1.00 Deposit with each tire ordered ($4.00 deposit on each truck tire). Balance C.O.D. If you send cash in full deduct 8%. Year's service guaranteed, or replacement at ½ price. Order today.
ATLAS TIRE & RUBBER CO., Dept. A-6
6250-52 SOUTH MORGAN STREET, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

NEW STUFF FOR MEN — MAGGIE & JIGGS

Tillie and Mac; Dumb Dora; Boss and Bubbles; Peaches and Browning; A French Stenographer; A Bachelor's Dream; A Model's Life; Adam and Eve; Kip and Alice; Harold Teen and Lillums; Toots and Casper; The Gumps; Winnie Winkle; Gus and Gussie; Barney Google and Spark Plug; Boob McNutt and Pearl; Tillie the Toiler; A Broker's Stenographer; Mabel with the Old Fiddler; The Unfaithful Wife; What the Janitor Saw in the Artist's Studio; A Strip Poker Card Game; A Saleslady and a Scotchman; The Iceman on the Look-out; The Butler and the Missus Taking Her Morning Exercise. Also 32 high-grade glossy photos of naughty French Poses. French Men and Women in French Style Love Scenes. Also Women alone, in different poses. And 8 Photos of Beautiful French Models with beautiful forms, in daring poses taken from life. All the above will be sent you prepaid for only $1.00. **CARRANO SALES CO., Dept. G7-11-TP, NEW HAVEN, CONN.**

. . . QUIT WHISKEY . . .

The Health Products Company, of Kansas City, is now offering a NEW scientifically prepared treatment to aid men and women banish all desire for drinking. Thousands have already proved **FREE** success of this New Easy Way. Can be given secretly. Write today for Free Booklet. Accept no substitutes. Write

HEALTH PRODUCTS CO., 2260 Manufacturers Exch. Bldg., KANSAS CITY, MO.

CAN HAIR BE REGROWN

Send today for free advice regarding Hair and Scalp Troubles . . . their causes and how to treat them. Learn how in many cases you can stimulate hair growth, stop itching scalp and remove dandruff. No obligation . . . all FREE upon request in plain wrapper.

MAIL COUPON TODAY!

ALWIN, Dept. 601, 75 Varick Street, New York

Please send advice on correcting hair troubles to

Name .....

Address .....

Read what happened to these two men when I said:

I will Train You at Home in Spare Time for a GOOD JOB IN RADIO

These two fellows had the same chance. Not long ago they each clipped and sent me a coupon, like the one in this ad. They got my book on Radio's opportunities.

S. J. Ebert, 49-B Quadrangle, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, saw that Radio offered him a real chance. He enrolled. The other fellow, whom we will call John Doe, wrote that he wasn't interested. One of those fellows who wants a better job, better pay, but never does anything about it. One of the many who spend their lives in a low-pay, no-future job, because they haven't the ambition, the determination, the action it takes to succeed.

Read what S. J. Ebert wrote me and remember that John Doe had the same chance: "Upon graduation I accepted a job as serviceman, and within three weeks was made Service Manager. This job paid me $40 to $50 a week compared with $18 I earned in a shoe factory before. Eight months later I went with Station KWCR as operator. From there I went to KTNT. Now I am Radio Engineer with WSUI. I certainly recommend the N.R.I. to all interested in the greatest field of all, Radio."

Get ready for Jobs like these. Many Radio Experts make $40, $60, $75 a week

Spare time and full time set servicing; installing, operating, maintaining broadcast, aviation, commercial, police, ship and television stations. Good jobs with Radio dealers and jobbers. A service shop or Radio retail business of your own. I'll train you for these and other good jobs in connection with the manufacture, sale and service of Radio sending and receiving sets, auto sets, loud speaker systems, short wave sets, etc.

"I want to help you. If you are earning less than $35 a week I believe I can raise your pay. However, I will let you decide that. Let me show you what I have done for others, what I am prepared to do for you. Get my book, read it over, and decide one way or another." *J. E. Smith.*

Save Money—Learn at Home. Money Back Agreement Protects You

Hold your job. I'll train you quickly and inexpensively right at home in your spare time to be a Radio Expert. You don't need a high school or college education. My 50-50 method of training—half with lessons, half with Radio equipment—gives you broad practical experience—makes learning at home easy, fascinating, practical. I will agree in writing to refund your money if you are not satisfied with my Lesson and Instruction Service when you finish.

Earn $5, $10, $15 a Week in Spare Time

That's what many of my students do soon after enrolling. I'll give you special training, plans and ideas to help you do it. Many students have made $200 to $1,000 in spare time while learning. Nearly every neighborhood offers a spare time serviceman an opportunity to make good money. I'll show you how to "cash in"—show you why my Course is World-Famous as "the Course that pays for itself."

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Mail the coupon. My book is free to any ambitious fellow over fifteen years of age. It tells you about Radio's spare time and full time job opportunities—about my Course, what I give you, what my students and graduates do and make. There is no obligation. Act today. Mail coupon in an envelope or paste on a 1c postal card. Do it right now.

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 5AA8
Washington, D. C.

MAIL THIS NOW

FOR FREE BOOK OF FACTS ABOUT RADIO

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 5AA8
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send free book about spare time and full time Radio opportunities and how I can train for them at home. (Please print plainly.)

Name ..... *Age* .....

Address .....

City ..... *State* .....

A Money-Making Opportunity

for Men of Character

EXCLUSIVE FRANCHISE FOR

AN INVENTION EXPECTED TO REPLACE A MULTI-MILLION-DOLLAR INDUSTRY

Costly Work Formerly "Sent Out" by Business Men Now Done by Themselves at a Fraction of the Expense

This is a call for men everywhere to handle exclusive agency for one of the most unique business inventions of the day.

Forty years ago the horse and buggy business was supreme—today almost extinct. Twenty years ago the phonograph industry ran into many millions—today practically a relic. Only a comparatively few foresighted men saw the fortunes ahead in the automobile and the radio. Yet irresistible waves of public buying swept these men to fortune, and sent the buggy and the phonograph into the discard. So are great successes made by men able to detect the shift in public favor from one industry to another.

Now another change is taking place. An old established industry—an integral and important part of the nation's structure—in which millions of dollars change hands every year—is in thousands of cases being replaced by a truly astonishing, simple invention which does the work better—more reliably—AND AT A COST OFTEN AS LOW AS 2% OF WHAT IS ORDINARILY PAID! It has not required very long for men who have taken over the rights to this valuable invention to do a remarkable business, and show earnings which in these times are almost unheard of for the average man.

EARNINGS

One man in California earned over $1,600 per month for three months—close to $5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A Georgia man made $802.50 his first two weeks. A Connecticut man writes he has made $55.00 in a single day's time. Texas man nets over $300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from $5 to $60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

Not a "Gadget"— Not a "Knick-Knack"—

but a valuable, proved device which has been sold successfully by business novices as well as seasoned veterans.

Make no mistake—this is no novelty—no flimsy creation which the inventor hopes to put on the market. You probably have seen nothing like it yet—perhaps never dreamed of the existence of such a device—yet it has already been used by corporations of outstanding prominence—by dealers of great corporations—by their branches—by doctors, newspapers, publishers—schools—hospitals, etc., etc., and by thousands of small business men. You don't have to convince a man that he should use an electric bulb to light his office instead of a gas lamp. Nor do you have to sell the same business man the idea that some day he may need something like this invention. The need is already there—the money is usually being spent right at that very moment—and the desirability of saving the greatest part of this expense is obvious immediately.

Some of the Savings You Can Show

You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for $11 which formerly could have cost them over $200. A building supply corporation pays our man $70, whereas the bill could have been for $1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative $15, whereas the expense could have been over $1,000. A department store has expense of $88.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over $2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

Profits Typical of the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a $7.50 order, as much as $5.83 may be your share. On $1,500 worth of business, your share may be $1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollar's worth $6.70, on a hundred dollars' worth $67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

This Business Has Nothing to Do With House to House Canvassing

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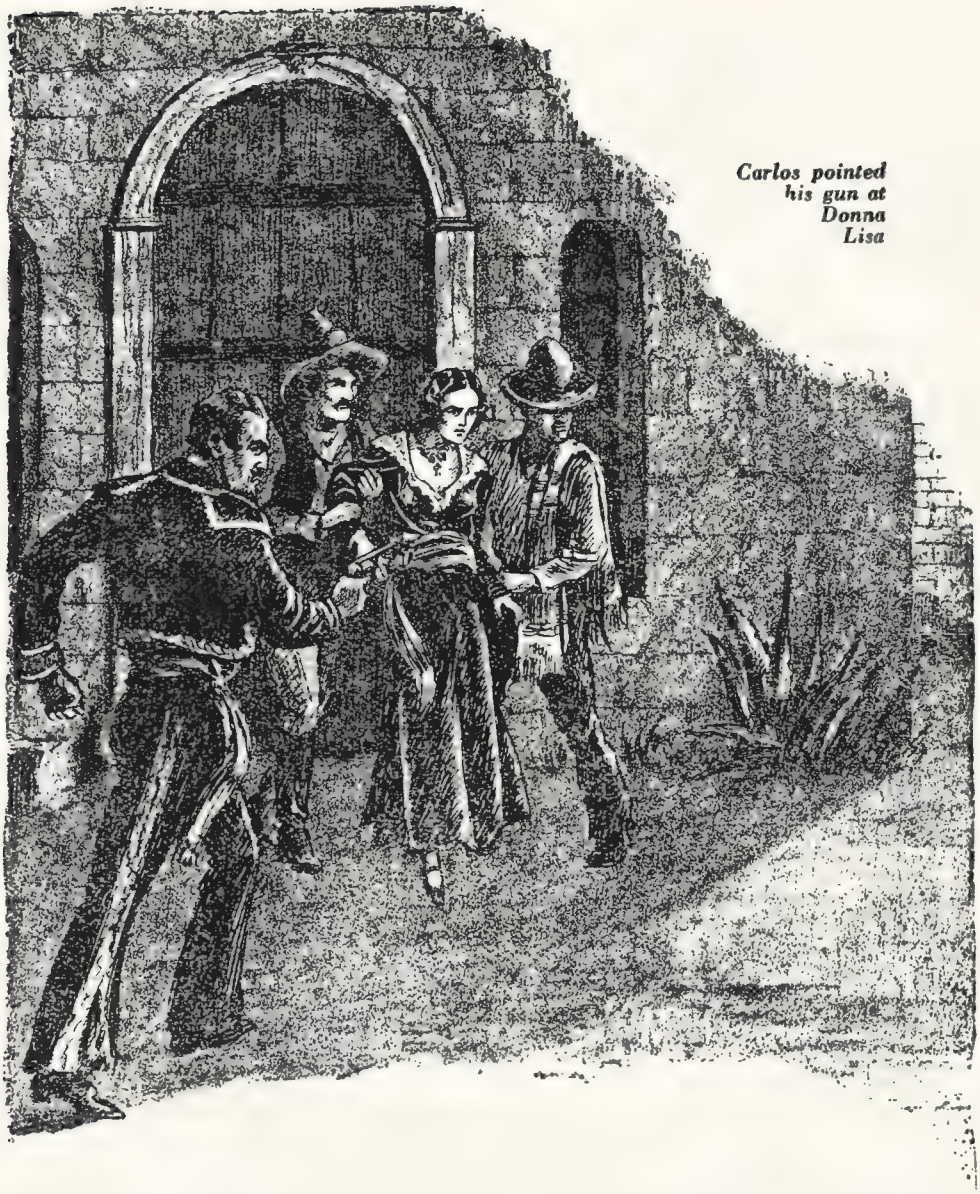

Carlos pointed his gun at Donna Lisa

The border told a strange story of a lowly Mex peon who went into a saloon, and ten minutes later came out a mighty don, a grandee of Old Spain. But his heart was the same hate-riven heart of the peon. And he laid the sinister plans that had festered in his soul. Those brain-warped plans included a tough, square-shooting Texan; a treacherous breed knifeman, and a big gent who claimed to be the fastest gunhand on the border. But those plans did not include Don Diego, the bes' dam' caballero and the biggest liar in all Mexico. Yet Don Diego rode the fear trail to the Hotel of the Damned.

The Fear Trail

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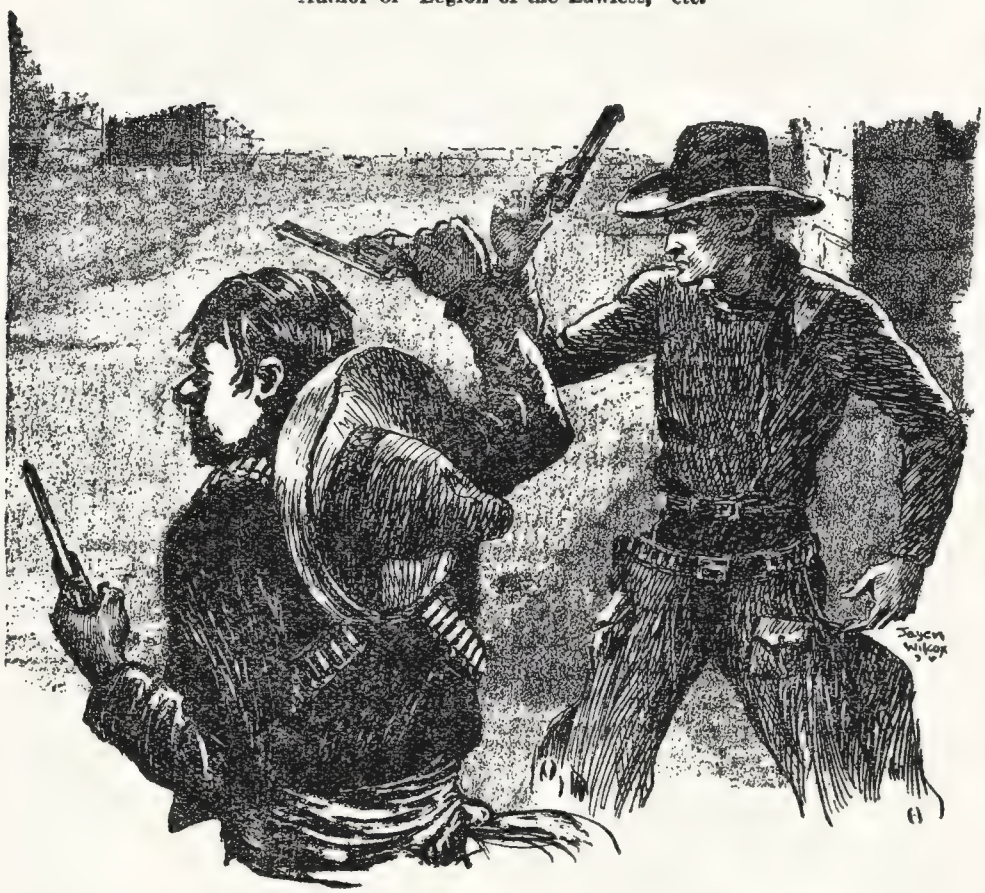


CHAPTER I

Hotel of the Damned

HIS name was Carlos Corilla. He was a wandering vaquero, none too particular about what spread he rode for. Just another spiggoty drawing down his forty per and beans. Liked to sit back from the fire at night, sometimes sing, sometimes play with a knife, eyes glowing. But there were three things about Carlos Corilla that made him different.

He had hands like a woman's and he kept them as a woman would keep hers; he was proud of those hands. The sec-

ond thing was that he spoke perfect English. Both of which were damned strange for a peon. The third thing was that he was yellow, yellow as hell whether it might be a gun or a knife or a man's hand.

But all that was a long time ago. For Carlos Corilla died one sultry afternoon in John the Dutchman's place. At least, he sent the green flies buzzing as he pushed through the batwing doors. And Carlos Corilla never passed out those doors again.

There wasn't much to it. The Dutchman put on his spectacles and went over to the patch of wall beside the cash register where he tacked up the letters that came in. He pried out a tack and took down an envelope that had gotten yellow and dusty. It'd been there so long.

"Here yuh are, Carlos. Come from Spain. Some dame tryin' tuh give yuh a catchin'?"

Carlos Corilla never answered. He had the letter slit open, and John the Dutchman couldn't read Spanish. So that was all John the Dutchman knew. Except that when he was finished reading, Carlos stood a long time, not moving, not saying anything. When he did move, it was to empty his beer glass on the floor, put a twenty-dollar bill on the bar, and demand the best wine in the place.

He drank it very slowly, then went out. John followed him to the bordertown street and told him Dinty Weeks was looking for hands for a "cartridges free" spread. John felt a little sorry for Carlos because he figured that sawbuck was half his pay. And he knew Carlos had been fired a few days before in a fight with the straw boss up at the Split-Tulip outfit. Soldier Rammer, one of the slickest gunmen in the country, was that straw boss.

John sure felt sorry for Carlos. Carlos was getting old. He still stood just as straight. But there were streaks of white in his black hair. And his olive skin stretched in taut hollows beneath the cheekbones. His boots were patched, too.

So John said: "Dinty Weeks is lookin' fer punchers thet know what tuh do with a gun-iron an' when tuh do it. I said if yuh came in—"

And the man who had been Carlos Corilla said three names as he stared at a yellow-spotted dog scratching his fleas in the sun and not seeing it at all. He said:

"Pedro the Carver." And he didn't say anything for a long time. Then he added another name. "Rattler John Jones . . . . and Soldier Rammer . . . . May they rest in peace."

And he kept watching the dog who had no more fleas to scratch but kept sitting in the middle of the road anyway.

John the Dutchman figured Carlos was maybe going a little loco. Spics did that. Inbred too close, sometimes, especially those peons. So John took off his spectacles and said it louder as if maybe Carlos Corilla couldn't hear.

You see, John the Dutchman knew those three men whose names Carlos had whispered. Or had known them at one time. And he knew none of them were dead. Yet Carlos had said "Rest in peace" as if they were already dead—or as good as dead.

So John said it again. "Dinty Weeks is lookin' fer punchers thet know what tuh do with a gun-iron—"

"Tell Dinty Weeks," said the hombre who had been Carlos Corilla, "that if he knows some extra good gun-slingers who can shoot when they're told—tell him Don Carlos de Velasquez y Corilla can use them. For Don Carlos de Velasquez y Corilla rides for no man any more." And he mounted and rode away. All John the Dutchman could say afterward was: "When he went out—he was a different hombre from the gent thet come in. He was a different hombre."

So passed Carlos Corilla. So came Don Carlos de Velasquez y Corilla. And the time came when men forgot about both. Except the three men whose names he had mentioned in tones one reserves for the dead—or, perhaps, the doomed.

"He was a different hombre," the Dutchman said often.

THAT was the end of the story of Carlos Corilla. And it might have been the end of the story of Don Carlos de Velasquez y Corilla as well. Three men could have told something of him. But they were doomed to die, anyway. What dead men say is seldom repeated. But one Don Diego, bandido son of a *paisano* who'd never learned to wear shoes, drew chips in that game. And the Diego gent did not die easily. So he himself said.

"Si, señores. Me, I have the date with *Señor Diablo.* An' the date like that—she mus' be kept. No? So you see, *amigos,* Diego he cannot die. *Hola!"*

But the gigantic spic came mighty close to it that day he rode up to the *Casa dos Perditos* to get himself a new pair of boots. The *casa* was in the heart of that desert that stretched like a lolling tongue south from Coahuilla Springs. "Mother" Flynn ran it. Mother was a toothless breed crone with the face of a shriveled madonna and the heart of Satan's own stepdaughter. She could shoot in the back better than most men.

The *casa* was an abandoned hotel in the midst of an arid waste of sand, cacti, and lava outcroppings. Mother Flynn had moved in. And there had followed, for varying periods, the wanted men of the law. Thus—The Hotel of the Damned.

And Diego rode there to get a new pair of boots. The ones he had on pinched. His own were soleless. And peon rumor had told him there were guests at the *casa.* Diego hoped there was one with feet as big as his own. He preferred hand-tooled leather, too.

WITH a handful of his tattered followers at his back, Diego reined up before the tumbling ruin of the *casa.* With the exception of the buzzard on a limb of the withered pepper tree inside the wall, no living thing was in sight. Diego pushed back his gigantic sombrero with a broad grin.

"Ohe, amigos! Diego, he ees come—for to pay the veesit!" he roared. "Hey, *Madre* Fleen!"

There wasn't a sound. Diego slid from his pony, spat the brown cigarette stub from his mouth, hauled up his torn, soiled white pants. He was a huge chunk of a man, that grinning spic outlaw. Well over six feet, he had great hunks of shoulders, a mouth like a sword slash, and hands that could and had broken a man over his knee. He was the biggest liar to ever come out of the province of Chihuahua. But he had a trick of backing up those lies with fighting. He also had a weakness for red neckties.

"Nobody home, hey?" With a broad wink to his men, he swaggered through the sagging gate in the dobie wall. Through the courtyard rank with weeds, he strode carelessly. An outlaw himself, he had nothing to fear. He passed under the sagging balcony and down the dim hall leading to the patio in the center. Mountain-like and intimidating, his shadow preceded him and his humming song and the clank of his spurs. He stepped into the harsh sunlight of the patio. And knife steel slithered off the dobie with an ugly scraping sound six inches from his left shoulder.

The slouching hulk of a spic became a great cat of a man in the fraction of a second. He wasted no look toward the knife nor where it had struck. Spinning to take in the whole patio, he was down on one knee in a flash, dragging both of his Colts. Those huge guns were dwarfed by his great hands.

He spotted the man who'd flung the knife. It was a breed standing on the narrow gallery running around the four sides of the patio. He was almost directly over Diego, a little behind him. He was dressed in black, extremely long and narrow-faced. And he was struggling like a dogie under the branding iron, at the moment.

Diego couldn't shoot. A gangling, yellow-haired kid had his long, skinny arms wrapped around the breed. They wrestled for possession of that second blade the latter had poised to throw. Diego let out a shout as he rammed his Colts back into their holsters and swept off his anthill-shaped sombrero.

"Madre de Dios—So eet ees you, Pedro the Carver! Son of a dog!" The huge

bandido leaped, seized the edge of the sagging gallery, and hauled himself up. Pedro the Carver writhed and twisted and wriggled like a snake to get free. But the gangling kid in the city clothes, and despite the handicap of horn-rimmed glasses, held him, held the knife-hand, too.

Diego swaggered along the gallery. "Let heem go!" he commanded. He still wore that big, good-natured grin.

The yellow-haired kid released Pedro. Huddling back against the wall, the thin knifeman babbled and pleaded in a jargon of peon Mex. Diego cut him short with an oath.

"So-o leetle wan, you have hear that they have put a fat price on my fine head in Nocozari. *Si?* Son of a wood-gatherin' peeg—"

His right paw swept out. In vain, Pedro the Carver tried to cringe from it. It landed with a thunderous clap across the whole front of his narrow, treacherous face. It wiped it from sight an instant. Pedro's face reappeared, stricken with fear, paralyzed from the blow, drooling red from the mouth. Diego lashed out carelessly with his other hand, open. Pedro the Carver stood swaying, eyes glassy. Then he spat some teeth and fell down.

"What a sock," the yellow-haired kid breathed.

CHAPTER II

Treachery Trap

DIEGO chuckled. "Sure, *señor*. Me, Diego, the best dam' caballero in all Mcsico! The bes' dam' knifeman in Chihuahua!" He stuck out one hand at the kid as he drew one of his Colts with the other. "*Gracias amigo.*"

The kid in the city clothes took the hand. "That's all right, mister. It didn't seem right—striking from behind. So I grabbed his arm just as he started the knife. He—" The kid grinned; he had a shy grin. "He—didn't look as if he'd miss."

"*Si, amigo,*" Diego agreed. "An' Pedro, he weel never miss again!"

Diego hoisted up his Colt, leveled it on Pedro as he lay on the gallery.

"Hey, you aren't—" the yellow-haired kid gasped. He grabbed Diego's immense arm.

The spic giant turned his head to the kid. "*Señor*—"

"Rammer. Henry Rammer. That's my name."

"*Señor* Rammer, you do not know the custom of thees countree. When the snake—"

Henry Rammer pushed a lock of yellow hair off his forehead. "Yes, you're right. I just came home from school in the East. But I know something about this country. You see, my dad was segundo of the old Split-Tulip spread. Soldier Rammer." The kid said that name proudly.

Diego's eyes widened. More than once, he had rustled stuff from the Split-Tulip bunch. Once, too, Soldier himself had planted a nice lead slug in Diego's thigh. Diego studied the kid a long moment. It didn't seem logical that the son of straight and square-shooting Soldier Rammer would be a wanted hombre.

"I know your fodder once, my frien'. You have save Diego's life. So—eef you say no—I do not shoot thees rat. Get up, Pedro!"

"Thanks, mister," the kid said.

Across the patio, on the other side of the gallery, a veritable bull of a man had appeared from a crumbling doorway. He toted a gun. He was well over six feet, as big as Diego himself, with a red moon of a face and three chins.

"Frien' of yours, hey, *amigo?*" Diego asked.

Henry Rammer shrugged. "I never saw him before. He says his name is Rattler John Jones."

The hag-like Mother Flynn appeared in the patio below and began to jabber at the three of them—the son of Soldier Rammer, Pedro the Carver, and Rattler John Jones.

When they all got down in the patio,

Mother Flynn cursed them in two languages, spic and bad English. "Yuh know fightin' ain't allowed here," she whined and railed. "Cain't have it. Think yuh'd git a bellyful uh it 'fore yuh came here. 'Sides, one uh yuh might git kilt."

She pulled the shawl closer over her wasted shoulders. That shawl was new. It looked as if it might have come from Seville. Yet Mother Flynn was a miser. She always wore rags.

"One uh yuh might git kilt. Yes." She said it again as she toddled out on her sore feet to get food. One of them getting killed seemed to worry her.

She brought in beans and some tortillas and a greasy platter of jerked beef. She slapped down a pot of coffee and some tin cups. When a step sounded in the courtyard, her wizened hand darted under the shawl. Every man but the Rammer kid reached for a gun, too. Mother Flynn slipped out.

When she came back she said it was one of Diego's lobo hands and he wanted food. She started to whine about how she couldn't hand out grub to everybody. Diego silenced her with a look. She tottered back to her kitchen, still whining. But when her back was turned toward them, her face had a sly smile.

"Hot, eh" Rattler John said as he squatted before a plate.

Diego slipped off the bandoliers that crisscrossed over his chest and hooked them over a bench. He dropped a Colt beside his cup and looked significantly at Pedro the Carver. They ate in silence. The coffee pot made the rounds for the last time. Querlies were rolled and lit.

THEY were a strange bunch. Pedro the Carver, snaky breed knifeman. Rattler John Jones, giant gun-fighter, whose idea of law was best expressed with a Colt. Henry Rammer, fresh from an Eastern college, son of one of the toughest straw bosses ever to work a spread along the border. And Don Diego, mammoth Mex outlaw, the biggest liar and hardest fighter in all Chihuahua.

Rattler John suddenly leaped off the chair he sat astride and ripped at his tied-down holster. Pedro the Carver sucked in his breath. Diego's paw moved swiftly beneath the table, folded over a gun butt. Swinging to the right, Rattler John hurled two quick shots into a cranny of the patio.

Then he walked over to where he had fired. His round, red face was ashen when he passed close to the lamp. He came back and sat down with a sheepish grin.

"Figgered it was a rattlesnake," he explained. "I can hear the rustle of 'em a mile away. Hell on them critters, I am. That's why they calls me Rattler John." He laughed weakly.

Pedro made a contemptuous hissing sound around his limp cigarette. Rattler John turned on him.

"Well, you back-stickin' breed, what of it? What of it?" He had a loud, nerve-jangling voice. "I hate the critters. See? Me, one uh the best triggermen along the border! See? I hate 'em! What if I am a-scared of 'em? But I ain't! Savvy? I kill 'em!"

There was a tension in the night air. True, it was the *Casa dos Perditos*. But the tension was more than that.

Diego leaned forward and cocked his big elbows on the table. He spoke as Mother Flynn's slippers scuffed some place in the darkness behind. "*Si, señor.* Ever' *hombrecito,* he ees afraid of sometheen'."

"Sure, sure," Rattler John said. "Some gents, they hate a knife." Pedro the Carver's eyes gilttered. "Some gents," Rattler John went on, "will fog it 'cross three counties sooner 'n face a preacher with a woman." He laughed, weakly. Nobody else did. Pedro the Carver spat. He had been married four times, once with the aid of a rifle. Not his rifle.

"An' some hombres," Rattler John went on slowly, "gits cold an' green at the idear of a piece uv hemp 'round their neck—like this!"

Reaching over suddenly, he seized Pedro the Carver under the throat. With a rattling sound from his gullet, Pedro scurried backward crablike without rising from his chair. His treacherous eyes were sucked back into his head. The

only sound was the wet noise his mouth made as it gasped for air. Yet Rattler John did not hold him tightly. The knifeman wrenched himself away finally.

Rattler John guffawed as if it were a tremendous joke. His face was red again. And his three chins waggled with his mirth. "Sure, every gent's a-scared uh something."

Henry Rammer, the kid, spoke. "Fear's ignorance."

Diego's brows drew down, perplexed. "*Quien es?*"

The kid pushed back his yellow hair and adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses nervously. "Well, being afraid is stupid."

"*Si?*"

"Sure. We're only afraid of what we can't understand. When you know what a thing is, what it means, you aren't afraid of it any more."

RATTLER JOHN laughed and cursed. "Hell, if I had a slug in my belly, I'd know what it was all right. But I'd be damned scared. So'd anybody who ain't a dang fool."

Diego moved the brown paper cigarette to the other corner of his mouth. He seemed to be half listening. "*Señor* Rammer, you, you fear notheen'?"

The kid smiled that shy smile and shook his head as Mother Flynn pattered in with a *tequilla* jug and a bowl of soiled salt. She went off and Rattler John began to fill the tin cups with the coffee dregs still in them.

Spitting out his cigarette, Diego heaved his huge body up.

"*Si, señor.* Maybe you. Why nots? But me, Diego, he ess afraid of sometheen' now. Wan moment—an' I be back weet' you."

He rose and moved toward the hallway. The darkness muffled his great-limbed form as it slid silently from sight. At the *casa* wall he hunched low, slid out a Colt. He called once, then whistled.

There was no reply. And there wasn't a rattle of bridle chain or creak of saddle leather from the edge of the desert. Diego's lips curled back. He had left his handful of hungry followers there. And when Rattler John had fired at what he'd thought was a snake in the patio, and there'd been no sign from his *hombrecitos,* Diego had sensed something wrong.

His boots squished softly as he moved over the sand. Then he stumbled over something. When he bent, his fingers found cold flesh. Sibilant Mex oaths broke from his lips as his hand explored. It was one of his men with a knife hilt sticking from between his shoulder blades.

And that was the only man of Diego's band left. There was a nasty laughing gleam in the giant spic's eyes as he wheeled slowly to search the darkness. He caught the red glow of a cigarette tip out on the desert. It vanished the next instant, behind a cactus perhaps. His head turned slowly. There was another cigarette being smoked in the south, too.

Diego spat into the sand. Then he strode back to the patio. He entered the circle of lamplight, gun still drawn. Wide-legged, he stood tossing up the Colt and catching it in one of his big paws.

"So, *hombrecitos*—the game, she ees come to a close!"

CHAPTER III

Boot Hill Fodder

RATTLER JOHN rubbed his third chin. Pedro the Carver half rose, lean face twisting. But his eyes couldn't leave Diego. Henry Rammer was already standing. He took a tailor-made cigarette out of his pocket. They all watched Diego.

The spic outlaw spoke again. His gun was tossed no longer. It spiked from his brown hand. And it wheeled slowly back and forth to cover the three.

"Come, *amigos.* Speak! My men—they have been run off. *Madre* Fleen, she lie! My man deed not want food. He came to tell me somebody ees come. Out een the desert—*señores* wait."

Still nobody spoke.

"Those *señores*," and Diego thumbed over his shoulder, "they have come for some wan of you. Who ees eet?"

There was no reply.

Diego laughed shortly and moved. He had Pedro by the front of his black coat, hoisted him clear of the ground with one hand, brandished his gun.

"Speak, dog! Why ees eet you are here, hey?"

Pedro goggled and shook his head. He jabbered it in Mex. A friend had told him if he came to the *Casa dos Perditos*, there was work for him. Somebody at the *casa* wanted to hire a knifeman. But he had been there two days. And nobody had come to hire him yet.

"Somebody—they do not wan' you, hey?" Diego barked.

Pedro started to whine about the gent who'd promised to hire him.

"Shut up!" Diego spat. Dropping Pedro as if he were a straw dummy, Diego whirled on Rattler John. The latter wasn't at all afraid of him.

"Don't go bawlin' off your head like a wind-bellied bounty hunter, spiggoty," he warned. "Nobody's after me. I did a six-year stretch at Yuma an' I'm in the clear."

The hunched Diego swung close to the man who was hell on snakes. "So-o?"

Rattler John leaned, crowding the giant. "I ain't hidin' out. See this. Savvy?" He held out a crumpled scrap of paper. Diego snatched it and wrinkled his sweaty forehead at it. Pedro the Carver laughed. The paper with the writing was upside-down.

"It says," Rattler John explained, "thet Washita Jay was headed for here. Washita Jay—what claims tuh be the best gunner along the border. See? Well, I got a few things tuh say 'bout that, too, seein' as how the night Washita an' me was a-goin' tuh smoke it out—I got a bullet in the back!"

"So-o?" Diego said to the red-faced, three-chinned gent,

"So I'm here!" Rattler John yelled. "An' thet Washita, like the yella dawg I always knew he was, ain't showed. He likely heard I was on my way."

"An' you, *Señor Rat*-ler, nobody ees after you, hey?"

Rattler John pushed his face at the towering Diego. "Spiggoty, I don't like the way yuh pernounce my name. An' git it right. Nobody's after me. I'm after somebody!"

Diego blinked and turned to the son of Soldier Rammer. The yellow-haired kid with the glasses shrugged. He was doing something with his hands. It was a stub-nosed automatic he had. And he was sliding out the cartridge clip. He tossed the weapon onto the table.

"My dad, Soldier, headed for here just before I got home from the East. That was the last heard of him. I came to find out what happened to him."

Diego pulled at his sombrero. "An' no wan they ees not after you, *amigo?*"

Young Henry Rammer shook his head. "No one is after me. But I got a hunch this is no accident—all of us being here." He nodded at his automatic. "Pedro. Rattler John. You both might as well do the same with your guns. Somebody put blanks in mine. Must have been last night when I was asleep."

Suspicious, Rattler John Jones hurled by Diego and rammed a sudden-drawn gun into the kid's coat.

"How come yuh got so wise? If yuh figger—"

The Rammer gunny never blinked an eye. "I don't figure. I knew—when you shot at what you thought was a snake."

Rattler sucked his breath. "Well?"

"Nothing hit. The dobie didn't break or anything at the spot where you shot. Of course, you might have missed."

"Me, I never miss!" Rattler roared. "I—" He stepped back, aimed at a piece of flagging, thumbed the hammer.

The gun roared. But nothing happened to the flagstone. Rattler started to roar how Mother Flynn had crossed them up. He began cursing for her to come out. Pedro slipped a derringer from his vest. It had been emptied.

"She's probably pulled stakes a long time ago," Rammer said calmly.

Diego laughed, pulling his second gun. "Thees, *amigos*, thees gons, they no have the blank. *Diablo* no! An' my belts—"

He turned to the bench over which he'd hung his bandoleers when he sat down to eat. The cartridge belts were gone.

Four hombres. Ten slugs. Men waiting out on the desert . . . .

THERE was nothing to do but wait. Rattler reported their ponies gone from the makeshift corral. So they sat and waited in that dobie ruin in the heart of the desert.

The moon came out and gilded the dobie with a phosphorescent glow. Pedro shifted his feet and his boots creaked. The Rammer gunny blew on his glasses and calmly polished them. Diego squashed three red ants with his thumb on the table top; childlike waited for the fourth to appear.

"Mex work," young Rammer said quietly. "They like to keep a hombre waiting."

Rattler cracked first. He slammed down the *tequilla* jug. "Yuh say there's somethin' out there on the desert?"

Diego rubbed his nose with a shiny gun barrel. "*Si.* Someteeng! Wan beeg bunch of men. I gat wan dam' good idea why."

Rattler snuffled and licked his lips. "They's after one uh us here, thet's sure. One uh us done somethin'—" He stopped and his eyes shifted around. First to Diego. He couldn't read anything from the huge bandido's grin. Then Rammer.

"Guess yuh never did much more'n gun up a honkatonk bar."

Pedro answered for him. "Sure, me, I done plenty." He patted his knife. "But ghosts don't bother me. An' I made the ghost of mos' all of 'em. I remember the first one. He, I deed not kill. He ran like the yellow dog. It was my first fight with the knife. Over a girl. I even 'member his name. It was Carlos. But," he shrugged, "he yas yellow, very yellow."

Rattler fingered his chins. "Yeah, I shot a gent called Carlos once. Didn't kill him, though. Jus' burned down his boss. An' he drew chips. My iron was empty. So I hit him across the nose with it. Then I grabbed his gun an' shot him in the pants as he ran. He was yella as hell, too."

The night was quiet. A pony nickered faintly out on the desert. Rattler and Pedro the Carver reached for the jug simultaneously. Young Rammer sat calmly. Diego addressed him.

"Maybe you, hey, know wan of thees Carlos, *amigo?*"

THE kid smiled and shook his head. "Only knew one Mex, mister, that I remember. It was his eyes—after dad struck him. Was up in the Panhandle. The Mex let a cow critter get away from him in the brandin' pen. It darn near gored the old man. And he hit the Mex a mean wallop, then fired him. Dad was almighty feared of a cow critter's horns. Don't know why. But I never forgot that Mex' eyes after—"

"*Buenos noches, señores!*"

And the silent threat hidden in the night became real. Real in the form of a tiny, catlike Mex with green velvet pants, in the archway of the patio. His eyes glittered, like a cat's, too, in the darkness. When he bowed, lamplight gleamed on the gun barrel spiking from his hand. A couple of gunmen flanked him.

Rattler was up with a curse. Pedro tried to edge back from his chair. And little Rammer stood level eyed. The great Diego merely yawned.

"'*Dios,*" he yawned again, "but you keep wan waiteeng!"

"A thousan' pardons," Green Pants said with flashing teeth, as the gunner on his right spat.

A spur clinked on the gallery rimming the patio. Diego turned and stared around. "Five, seex—maybe two-t'ree more."

The Rammer kid fired a cigarette. "We're outvoted from the start," he said quietly.

Green Pants took a couple of mincing steps forward. He had silver-inlaid boots that gleamed like patent leather. His bolero had a heap of silver on it, too. And his shirt underneath it, yellow, was of the purest silk.

"*Señores alta los manos!*" And the hammer of the gun in his hand clicked.

One of the gents on the balcony slid

over and dropped. He came walking up from behind, weapon drawn. He was a breed with one eye that gave him an evil look. He took off his hat and bowed mockingly. His head was shaven; it gave him the look of a Satanic executioner.

"Hello, everybody," he said. "Very glad tuh meet you. I am Tige Betters. My frien's call me Sweetheart. An' when our acquaintance ripens, you'll wish you never met me. If one of you dogs moves an eyebrow, I'll blow ever'thing under it tuh hell an' home again. I—"

"Acaba ya!" Green Pants commanded. He glanced around as a gunman disarmed Diego. He tolled off names. "Pedro—*si.* Rattler-r—*si.* An' *Señor* Rammer—*si.* We take a leetle ride, *muchachos! Si."*

Diego hitched at his dirty white pants. "Me, I theenk I go, too. If my frien' Henry go. Me, I go."

"No," Estevan, he of the green pants, said over his shoulder. "We do not want you. Thank the good God for that."

Diego's voice was almost pleading. He knew his countrymen. And he knew what the little ride might mean. "You take me, hey? Why nots? I make the ride—"

Estevan looked at him as he might look at dirt on his boot. *"Si."*

Tige "Sweetheart" Betters snickered. "Talk 'bout askin' fer a kick in the pants an'—"

Estevan preened the sliver of black mustache that shadowed his upper lip. *"Si.* We ride. You, *señores,* weel be the guests of Don Carlos de Velasquez y Corilla—for a leetle while."

CHAPTER IV

Captives' Cavalcade

ON the second day after that, the four from the *casa* with Estevan and his men reached the end of their ride. The first night they had crossed the desert. Then they had pushed into the low mountains in the south. They had long since ceased to wonder.

"It doesn't make sense—except for a madman," the Rammer kid had said more than once. "Just doesn't make sense."

And then he saw her.

They had just rounded a curve in the rutted wagon trail and sighted the big white *hacienda.* It sat with a certain hauteur on a knoll. A rough Moorish-type tower, constructed by the crude hands of peon labor, spiked from the south end. The rear of it, facing west, ran down in a sheer, rampartlike wall that joined the steep slope of the knoll. It looked like the battlements of some medieval castle, something that might be found in the fastnesses of the Pyrenees.

Rattler spat and began to swear, unhurriedly and foully. And Rammer told him to shut up, suddenly and curtly. The gunman turned on him. The kid said:

"There's a lady!" And he nodded his head toward the right of the trail winding between low banks.

On a huge, spirited sorrel, she sat watching the passing of the slow-moving cavalcade. A few feet behind her was another rider, a spic in green velvet pants like Estevan's and with a rifle resting over his saddle. She was little more than a girl, slim, tall, sitting side-saddle. She wore the long, flowing skirt of a well-born *señorita.* Her hair, under an expensive, heavily conchaed sombrero, was coal black. Her round, beautiful face was held high with the disdain of the owners who ruled the land and the *paisanos* who went with it. Yet, somehow, she didn't seem Mex.

"Who's the dame?" Rattler demanded coarsely.

The sleek Estevan spurred up beside him and let him have the tip of a quirt across the mouth. Then he doffed his own sombrero with a sweeping gesture and bowed.

"Doña Lisa," he murmured.

"Who's she?" the Rammer kid asked.

"The wife of Don Carlos," Estevan said.

Her large eyes followed them as they passed upward. And there was a strange sadness in them. Then she suddenly frowned as she stared hard at one. The next moment, she had spoken to the caballero at her back, wheeled her sorrel,

and trotted from sight. Rammer looked around to where her eyes had been. He saw Tige "Sweetheart" Betters. The one-eyed breed was breathing hard.

Estevan cried out for them to spur their ponies. And they rounded another bend and trotted into the wide-flung courtyard before the strange *hacienda*. The prisoners were hauled from the saddle. The catlike Estevan swaggered up before the hulking Diego.

"Now, *amigo*, perhaps that you are here, you wish you had not been so eager to come. When Don Carlos is finished with you—" Estevan winked slyly. Tige Betters snorted behind the little segundo.

Rattler John spat and bragged. "If yuh mangy spiggoties figure yuh can keep me here—"

Estevan brushed some dust from Rattler's shirt front. "The *dorados* of Don Carlos do his bidding—well. *Muy bueno.*"

Estevan's men were cutting their cramped arms free. But the four were well covered. And Diego made his answer. He pushed up his gigantic hat, rubbed back the ragged hair plastered over his sweaty forehead. He spoke gravely:

"*Señor* Estevan, there were some *muchachos* of mine at the *casa* in the desert. Something happens to them. Yes. One of them, he had a knife in his back. He was very dead. That was Jose."

Something in Estevan, quailed before the grave words, the sad eyes of that spic bandido who usually laughed and took what he wanted. Even though Estevan held a gun. Even though the big spic was in the hands of his *dorados*, in the power of his master, Don Carlos. Estavan snapped:

"*Diablo!* He was only a peon!"

"A peon? True, he did not have the green velvet pants. But Jose—he was a good-d boy an' me, Diego, I like heem. Some day, I show you."

"Git 'em along there," one of the gunmen snarled.

They were ushered into the *hacienda*, down a hallway wide and cool in its deep dimness. Estevan preceded them into a long room, white-walled but dark, gloomy with its velvet drapes and heavy, ancient mahogany furniture. It was very quiet except for the slither of some straw-shoed peon servant as he slipped out the door. There didn't seem to be a living thing in the room. It was like a tomb of dead dreams.

Then something stirred in a great high-backed chair at one end of the long table. The skin of a dead-white hand made a moving patch on the mahogany expanse of the table. Burning eyes and a small, handsome head took form.

It was Don Carlos himself. Estevan, with a curt nod of his head, sweeping back the blanket over his shoulder, said so. Estevan said:

"Don Carlos de Velasquez y Corilla! *El hacendado!*"

PLUCKING at the huge cameo ring on the finger of his left hand, he leaned toward them. He was garbed in plain black with a stiff-bosomed shirt and a black tie, knotted loosely at the throat. His clothes were severe. And so was the narrow, flat-cheeked face that stared at them. Hair, almost white, was drawn tightly back from it to a queue behind.

"You, the big one!" He flicked a finger at Diego. "Who are you, *paisano?*"

Diego crossed his arms over his chest big as a barrel. "Me, I am the best dam' caballero in all—"

"Don Carlos," Estevan explained, "he was with them at the *Casa dos Perditos*. He said he must come along with his friend, the little one—this *Señor* Rammer. So—"

Don Carlos rose, breath hissing through his teeth. The blanket fell from the *hacendado's* thin, velvet-clad legs. A metal-bound quirt slid from his lap and slapped onto the flagging.

"Soldier Rammer," he said in that hard, dry, whirring voice. Then he peered closer. His emaciated jaw snapped shut. And his smoldering eyes seemed to burn back deep into his skull. "Soldier Rammer—no, you fools, it is not him! *Diablo!* Blundering sons of goat-herders!" He hurled down curse after curse on the heads of his *dorados*, Estevan in particular. The room rang with the imprecations of his spleen.

"*Madre* Flynn gave us the word he called himself Rammer," Estevan sought to explain, fingering his serape nervously. "She—"

"*Acaba ya!* Shut up!" Don Carlos barked, peering closer at the kid. "Not Soldier Rammer. No—no-o—"

And young Rammer returned his stare steadily from behind the spectacles. "Not Soldier Rammer, señor. Soldier's son!" He drew himself up a little. "I went to the *casa* to find my dad and—"

"So-o." There was music, and delight in that music, in the voice of the *hacendado* as he sank back to his chair. "So-o. No, you will not find your father. Soldier came to the *casa*. You see, he got word that the man who was rustling his cattle was there."

The don's laugh was like the slither of a snake's belly in dry grass. That laugh had been years coming. He went on. "I sent him that word. But—unfortunately, he escaped my stupid *dorados*. He got out on the desert, wounded, without a horse. And men do not live long—on the desert."

CHAPTER V

DUNGEON OF THE DON

THERE was Rattler John's breathing, he had adenoids, and the buzz of a fly in that room. That was all the sound.

Rammer blinked once. "Mister Spic, as long as they still make guns and there's one breath left in me—your hide won't be worth two-bits bounty money any place. Because I'll blow so many holes in it!"

There was something in that kid's voice. Something in his tight-skinned face. A man-killer might have threatened. And it could have been no more fearsome. Don Carlos threw himself out of his chair, snatched the quirt from his feet, and lashed out with it. The rawhide sang around the kid's legs. He didn't stir.

"Perhaps you do not know who I am?" the *hacendado* demanded.

The shadow of a smile tinged Rammer's mouth as he shrugged. "I don't know. An' I care a heap less. But this I do know. There never was a day when my breed couldn't whip yours!"

Don Carlos sucked in his mouth, tautened like a twisted, tight-string wire as his rage climbed. He spat coldly furious words. Of who he was, Don Carlos de Velasquez y Corilla. Of who his forefathers were. Of how they'd ridden behind the banners of Aragon, been lords of Seville, been the flower of Old Spain.

That little Rammer waited for him to finish, then laughed quietly in his teeth. "My old man was a flower of the Rio, a cactus flower, tough, rough an' ornery! The best straw-boss to fling a cartridges-free outfit below the Line! He didn't bother none with a banner. But when he waved his Colts—good men, danged good men, sloped it down to the next county!"

Don Carlos smiled tolerantly. "Yes?"

"Yes," Rammer concluded, "an' if you'd been there, I'd copper my bets at ten-to-one you'd have crawled!"

The *hacendado* remained frozen. Then he backed to his chair, wordless. And when he raised his head again, the paleness of his face had given way to black. He was remembering. And remembering, he proceeded to mete out his verdicts. It was to Pedro he spoke first.

"Pedro the Carver. Back in Nocozari before you were known as the Carver."

Pedro's narrow body twisted inside his clothes. He half saw what was coming. "Back in Nocozari?"

Dan Carlos nodded. Told him, too, how there was one Carlos Corilla and a pretty girl. Of the knife-fight between that Carlos and Pedro himself. "You recall?" he finished.

Pedro said maybe he did, coughing out the words.

"I have never forgotten," the *hacendado* replied. "For I was that Carlos. Only then you did not know me as Don Carlos! Nor did you know I dared not fight to the death lest I be killed—for I was the last of my line. I had to live!" His eyes lifted heavenward.

Pedro gibbered. "*Si. Si.* We were very gay in those days."

"You, Pedro, have been gay for the

last time. It was I who sent you word there was work for you at the *casa*. Forgive me my little joke, Pedro. And if I am not wrong—I believe you do not like the rope around the neck. No?"

Pedro sucked his breath hard. But it did no good. The rattle croaked in his contracted throat.

Don Carlos sat back twisting the cameo on his finger again. "Rattler John Jones, you perhaps—"

RATTLER snorted through his nose. "Save yer wind. I 'member. I gunned your boss an' made yuh take a run-out when yuh tried tuh back his play." He squared his shoulders. "Mebbe now yuh figger yuh can call me with a gun—both uh us with guns, I mean. Eh?"

Don Carlos studied the cameo ring. "They do not call you the Rattler because you are in love with the rattlesnakes. *Si?*"

Rattler had to say "Gawd" twice before he could put a curse on the end of it. He wasn't quite sure whether he wanted to pray or curse. A smile like the reflection of a white flame flickered on Don Carlos' face. Then he moved a long finger slowly to indicate young Henry Rammer, son of Soldier.

The man who had been Carlos Corilla had ridden on a spread rodded by Soldier Rammer. There was the day a bull busted out of the branding pen. Soldier Rammer was deathly afraid of bulls. And afterward he had knocked down Carlos Corilla.

"He struck me, in the face," Don Carlos told softly. "To me, that is the worst insult of them all. Blows we reserve for peons. I sought to bring your father here." He pulled the blanket up over his thin legs again as if he felt a draft. "He escaped."

"To die," young Rammer said. His calm matched Carlos'.

"I had other things planned for him. But perhaps you too have the fear of a bull's horns. No? We shall see. Perhaps you shall take your father's place in the bull-pen. Still I do not hate you—"

The don leaned across the table, hissing words sharp as a knife. His self-control ebbed. He raged in a hot whisper, boasted shrilly, gloated deep in his wasted throat. He told of his family back in Spain, their noble blood, how he had spent his life, once he came into his rights, finding the three who'd insulted him. Learning their fears, the one thing they feared most. His finger darted at them as if to pinion them against the wall.

"Every man, he fears something." The perfect-spoken English chilled the room. The hands like those of a woman's drifted back wearily to the table. Then, for a brief instant, the peon cowhand who'd vanished that day Carlos had pushed open the doors of the Dutchman's barroom, returned. The *hacendado* spat at them!

The Rammer kid smiled a little. But he wasn't looking at Don Carlos. And the don whirled to see what drew the kid's eyes. Hate, vengeance's shadow, spite, vicious bitterness all drained from the face of Don Carlos. He rose swiftly, easily, to stand straight as a lance, wasp-waisted, high-headed.

"Doña!"

SHE stood in one of the dim doorways giving from the gallery of the patio, so slim she seemed tall. Yet she was very small. And the heavy velvet curtain she stood holding accented the frailty of her body. She saw not Don Carlos nor anything else in that long room of gloom. Her eyes were locked with those of young Rammer.

He smiled a little. Her lips started to curve.

"Yes, Lisa, look well at them," Don Carlos said. "They once made the mistake of insulting a son of the House of Velasquez. They die."

She nodded like a person in a dream. Still she did not look at Don Carlos. Her face blanched as the meaning of his words seeped into her mind. In a quick, firm voice—a city voice—she said:

"All of them—die?"

The *hacendado* shrugged. "Perhaps not the big one." He meant Diego.

She kept looking at Rammer. And her head began to shake.

Rammer's smile widened. "No, I will not die. Don't worry," he said matter-of-factly. "I thought you were beautiful when I saw you on a horse—"

Diego hissed and waved a big paw to tell the kid to shut down. It was madness. But maybe the son of Soldier Rammer, for all his quiet ways, was a mad one. He went right on smiling straight at Donna Lisa, talking, too.

"I was wrong, Lisa! You're far more beautiful now."

She stood like one transfixed at his words. Her dark eyes widened. For an instant, she was like a bud responding to the sun. And that stripling of a kid was the sun.

It all happened quickly. The room suddenly felt as if the air had been sucked out of it. Don Carlos whirled on little Rammer, the *hacendado's* face a mask of fury. He read the signs. Saw what had flamed between the donna and that soft-voiced kid. And the man who'd once been Carlos Corilla, cowhand, passed sentence.

"You will take your father's place in the bull-pen. So. Out with them all now, Estevan!"

TIGE "Sweetheart" Betters had the healthiest, happiest laugh in the world. Maybe that was what made it sound so terrible, made it stick in the craws of that little band imprisoned in the vaultlike cellar of the hacienda. For Tige Betters had shown them things that weren't human, things that weren't meant for any place this side of hell.

Then he had helped Estevan lead them to the cellar of huge stone blocks, to the cell with the iron-barred door. And he had laughed some more as he went away—laughed like a little boy anticipating a treat. The last footstep died. A tingling of spurs. A slamming door.

In the gloom, Diego's great paw found the kid's arm, rested there a moment. Then the *bandido* chuckled deep in his chest.

"You gat the nerve like iron, leetle wan, hey?"

The flare of the match at his cigarette tip showed Rammer's face, pale but set. His voice answered through the hoarse roar of Rattler's epithets and the scrabble of the frantic knifeman's nails on the stone.

"I'll need it—in three days." He inhaled hard. "Yuh know, somehow I don't blame that Carlos gent much. It's just his night to howl. But those—"

He couldn't put the rest of it into words. The pit Tige had shown them. The naked-skulled breed had tossed a pebble into it. And there had been a slithering and hissing, cold rattles, vague, crawling shapes when they peered down. Snakes. Rattler had threshed back in the arms of his captors, coughing and slavering.

Tige Betters had led them on, further from the huddle of huts of Don Carlos' peons. Under a scaffold, he'd explained exhibit number two with the greatest of relish. There was no noose dangling from the scaffold. But there was a piece of rawhide soaking in water. And Tige Betters had taken it out, held it under Pedro's nose and shown him how it could be stretched. Told how it could be fitted snugly around a standing man's neck, say at dawn. Then when the sun rose and dried it and it shrunk.

He hadn't needed to explain further. Pedro had begun to choke as if that shrinking rawhide was already binding his windpipe.

The third stop had been a stable. Betters himself had seized the lantern from a *mozo's* paw and held it high. By the light of it, a vicious-eyed, black bull stood revealed securely chained in a stall. Immobile as a statue, it surveyed them, evil horns lowered.

"From the *torril* in Mejico City itself," Tige had told. "When a bull is too good for the toreador, he receives the mayor's pardon and is put up for sale. For breedin' purposes, maybe. *El Diablo* drove the finest matadors in the land to cover. Perhaps Don Carlos will use him for breedin' afterward." His one eye had drifted toward the Rammer kid with a "between-you-and-me" leer.

Rammer had two days. Pedro would go on the next dawn. Rattler John on the

second. And he would take his father's place in the bull pen on the third. Tige Betters had made things very, very clear.

Diego's big fingers tightened on the kid's arm. "That bool—you are not afraid of him, hey?"

The kid's misery could be felt in the darkness as he shook his head. "Yeah, Diego, I'm afraid. For the first time." The cigarette tip grew bright and hot as he sucked hard to take the choke out of his choice.

"When I looked at that damned bull—I saw my dad again—the time he ran from the one that'd busted from a brandin' pen. Dad was a brave cuss, fella. But he was scared then. An' I am now. Maybe it's something in the blood."

"Dios!" Diego spat. "Remember, *amigo,* wan dies *mañana, sabe.* Always eet ees tomorrow wan, he die. Nevair today."

The kid's cigarette made a red loop twice as it fell. His heel ground on it. He didn't seem to hear Diego. Gee, she was beautiful, that Lisa, wasn't she?"

Diego's hand trembled then on the kid's arm. "Maybe, *amigo,"* he said in a husky whisper, "you like me can see in the dark, the cat-eye, *si?* But eet ees not possible you see like that—even weet the glass. No?"

"The dark?" Rammer paused with another cigarette half to his lips. "See in the dark? What do y' mean?"

"She, the donna, she ees here now."

Rammer felt Diego's hand shoving him forward. He could see nothing in the darkness. He felt the cold column of one of the bars of the door. Then, warm flesh. A hand.

Donna Lisa's hand.

"Howdy, gringo!"

CHAPTER VI

Tige's Taunt

GRADUALLY he made her out, a dim shape swathed in a serape, crouching furtively outside the door. Her face was a pale disc. He stood quivering, peering through the black, bewildered.

"Hello, kid." Her little chuckle was guarded but warming and intimate. "Here's a pack of smokes. I saw you like tailor-made ones. So does Carl. Has them sent down from Frisco."

"Lisa!" the kid gasped. It seemed the most natural thing in the world that he should call her that. It seemed the most natural thing that they should stand as close as the bars would permit and talk.

"Don't call me that," she said quickly, a little bitterly. "That's his name for me. My own name's Mary. Mary Lewis. Pop used to own the Leaning-L in the Panhandle."

Mary Lewis' father had stopped lead in a Texas range war. The bank had foreclosed on the ranch. And Mary Lewis had gamely struck out for California. She'd ended up, like many another, waiting on table in a Frisco hash-house. It was there she'd met Don Carlos.

He used to come night after night to sip countless cups of coffee and stare at her. Never said a word. One night another customer had gotten fresh and Carlos had pulled a knife on him. They put him in jail for a while. Mary had gone there to thank him. When he got out, he called on her quite formally.

The courtship of Carlos Corilla had been beyond reproach. He'd always treated Mary Lewis as if she was some kind of a queen. He'd come to 'Frisco to arrange with the American representatives of the Spanish lawyers of the Corilla family. His father, Don Francisco, had died, leaving him a vast sum of money as well as an estate in Castile. So Carlos had said. He'd showed Mary letters and documents proving it. Then he'd asked Mary Lewis, daughter of a gunfighting Panhandle ranchman, to marry him.

When she refused, he'd vanished. A month later, to the date, he'd returned with stories of a wide-flung *hacienda* below the Line. And when Mary Lewis, broke and jobless, said she wanted to return to Texas, the ever gallant Don Carlos offered to take her back.

It had been a long train ride. At night, they had gotten off—at the border. And a greasy-pated, mumbling priest had

made her the wife of Don Carlos de Corilla y Velasquez—at gun-point.

"I've been practically a prisoner here ever since," she finished, glancing back down the tunnel. "Every consideration is shown me. I have everything I want. Don Carlos—"

Rammer swore very quietly but very fervently. "The rotton, snaky-eyed—"

She placed a firm, girlish hand over his mouth. "It isn't as bad as that. I hate him, the very sight of him! I'd hate anybody who made me do something I didn't want to. But—Carl's a gentleman. He's never touched me. I'm his wife in name only. At least, I was—"

"What do y' mean—was?"

Calmly, she scratched a match and held it to the smoke that quivered between his twitching lips. The game, twisted smile of one who's known Life's hard knocks was on her face.

"Carl's quite mad. What is your name?"

"Henry Rammer, M-Mary."

Her smile widened a little. "Hank, eh? Hank, Carl is playing for keeps. He's loco as the devil. A sane man wouldn't spend years tracing down three men who'd insulted him once. He even found out what each was afraid of. Now he's got you here. And—"

The kid's eyes steadied and grew hard back of the glasses. "I'll take all he can give and—"

THE serape slipped from her black hair as she shook her head at the hopelessness of it. "He tried three peons on that bull, *El Diablo*. They died, Hank. Not very prettily, either."

The kid shrugged. "He'll never make me cry 'Uncle'."

With an instinctive gesture, she clasped his hand. Their fingers entwined.

"I don't want you to die. Carl wants heirs—" Her whisper became bitter and half shrill. "The noble line of Don Carlos de Corilla y Velasquez must be handed down. I—I—" Her voice broke then. She was a game kid.

"That spic killed my dad. Now—you." Rammer's face twisted. "If I had a gun now—"

Her other hand slid under the serape, then out again. She had a gun, a bone-handled .48. The kid and Diego grabbed for it together.

"But I couldn't get any lead for it."

The fresh-sprung hope faded.

There was a soft slither, the barely audible rustle of a caught breath. Donna Lisa, Mary, swung around. For a moment, she cowered back. Then her nerve returned and her voice was clear and low, scornful, commanding.

"So you trail Donna Lisa like a dog, Estevan!"

"The gun—no bullets for it? *Muy malo*," the green-trousered segundo of Don Carlos simpered as he advanced in the dark. "Don Carlos will be happy to know. There is never a shortage of bullets in the *hacienda* for those who deserve them, no? We will go—"

His voice shut off as if somebody had closed a door on it. There was a brief second of spasmodic struggle in the blackness. Estevan's breath whistled between gripping fingers.

He didn't say anything more. The cat-eyed Diego's huge arm had snaked out between the bars, had found Estevan, his head, his face. And the spic *bandido's* great hand wrapped around that face, imprisoning its mouth, using it as a handle for the segundo's whole body. He yanked the body over flat against the bars, muttering happy oaths under his breath.

"Buenos noches, señora!" he suggested. What Diego was going to do was not going to be pleasant. Estevan must be silenced lest Don Carlos learn about the girl.

"Mary."

The kid's arms went through the bars, gripped her a moment.

Her chin went up. "But you mustn't die."

"Wait," he begged. "I have two more days. Even this empty gun maybe—"

She made a little sound like a sob. The kid felt the softness of her lips murmuring over, then brushing his hands. "I won't let you die." Then she was gone, the whisper of her skirts growing fainter, her little heels tapping. "Keep your

chin up, kiddo," she called back softly.

Then a door swung to. Diego released his impatience with a snorting breath. "We gat some bullets now, hey?" He shifted his body, telling the crowding Rattler and Pedro to stand clear.

THERE was a single coughing sound from Estevan. Once his boots kicked back feebly against the iron bars. Then Diego worked his other arm through, curled it around a bar and something else, and slid it back in on the other side of the bar. Nobody could see much in the dark.

"Shall I tap him with the gun barrel?" Rammer asked.

Diego didn't answer. Instead he began to talk about that poor Jose, his *mozo* who'd been knifed on the desert. "A good boy, that Jose . . . . Ver-ry good fello, yes. He used to sing ver-ry pretty too . . . . Hees brother, he ride with Pancho Villa heemself . . . . long time ago . . . . Jose tell me 'bout that brother many time. S-sure. Jose he got girl down Nocozari way, too. Eeet's very-ry sad-d."

The Mex giant went on talking. His arm seemed to be merely wrapped around a bar. A bar and something else. That something else was Estevan's neck. Diego's voice grew deeper.

"Damn it!" Rattler hissed. "Cut out that locoed sob-heavin', yuh spiggoty psalm singer!"

"You shuddup or maybe I knock you outa them boots, hey," Diego warned. And he went on talking about Jose. Then he began to talk to Jose himself like he was right there. His arm seemed to tighten.

"*Amigo*," he told the kid, "maybe *Señor* Estevan, he have a gon or a cartridge belt. He won't need them no more. You see. *Si*."

The kid bent and ran his hands up and down the figure dangling outside the bars. It seemed curiously limp. Rammer stood up.

"Not armed—not even a cartridge belt—"

Rattler's "Gawd" punctuated the whine of Pedro the knifeman. There was a cracking sound, squeamish, chilling. Diego slowly brought his arm back into the cell. And the form of Estevan slid down sacklike along the bars and lay still. The head was twisted at an impossible angle.

But it wasn't impossible for Estevan then. His neck was broken.

Diego shuffled over and curled up in a corner. "I feex everytheen', Jose." A moment later, he was snoring regularly.

THEY had to shake him awake the next morning when the severe figure of Don Carlos himself appeared at the cell door. It was scarcely dawn. Diego shambled up, knuckling sleep out of his eyes, face wreathed in a grin of childish content. He winked solemnly at the kid.

"Who of you dogs killed Estevan?" Don Carlos demanded.

Diego yawned and stretched. The rest of them stood still and silent, staring blankly into the piercing eyes of the don. Half an hour before, a peon had entered with a lantern, glimpsed the twisted form, then scampered out like a monkey. Later, a bunch of peons padded in barefooted and awed, and carted what had been the pride of the Green Pants away.

Now Don Carlos. He repeated it, waited, then hissed an oath. "Which of you, dogs? Speak!"

But there was no answer. Only Pedro made a strained sound in his throat. He stood arms outstretched, sort of clinging to the wall as if to hold himself from going forward. The don shrugged.

"What matters it? I wouldn't cheat the devil of his due, anyway." He went.

Diego sat down and took off his pinching boots. He remembered that he had first started for the *casa* to get a new pair of boots. He had almost forgotten. But his feet hadn't.

The sun was just coming up when they came for Pedro. They knew because the door at the end of the tunnel was open and faint gold filtered into that hole of the doomed.

Pedro begged and screamed and dragged his legs. Methodically they

pulled him out. Then it was quiet again until they heard the click of horns and the light rattle of goat hoofs. The guttural calls of the *paisano* herder came down to them.

Rattler cursed. "Somethin's wrong. They ain't killin' Pedro yet. We'd hear him screamin'." He couldn't stand the suspense. His turn would be next, on the morrow.

He was right. In a little while, Tige "Sweetheart" Betters came down and stood in front of the cell door and teetered back and forth on his heels and his toes. His satisfied smile ran halfway up his shaven skull. And his lone eye twinkled as he saw Diego pulling on his tight-fitting boots. He finally nodded at the big outlaws.

"For yuh, *amigo*, I fix up somethin' special. Sure. That's me—Sweetheart Betters. Never forgit anybody."

With a broad wink at the Rammer kid, Diego shuffled to the cell door. "What you theenk you do to me, hey?" Diego's eyes dropped to Sweetheart Betters' boots, stayed there.

The leering breed shook with silent laughter. "A heap, spiggoty. Nice big paws yuh got there, ain't they? The kind uh paws what could bust a gent's neck, huh? Specially a little gent like Estevan."

Diego's breath sucked in sharply. The others in the cell froze. Pedro had tried to save his own neck by treachery.

"Sure," Sweetheart assured them. "Pedro told the don all about it. He's a-gittin' his, anyway. But I git yuh, spiggoty." He rolled his lone eye and rubbed his hands.

"You get me, *muchacho!* Sure . . . . *mañana!*" Many hombres, they theenk they get Diego but—" He broke off. Rammer was beside him, taut, stiff, eyes set. "*Amigo*, do not be afraid of thees—"

"I'm not afraid for myself," the kid said in a thin, hard voice. "It's Mary—Donna Lisa."

"Her?" Tige Betters snorted. "She's awright. The don he's loco 'bout women anyway. Nothin' will happen tuh her. But some day, some day, I'll get her, too. Uh-huh. Never had a woman yet. An' I got ideas on how tuh make 'em scream! Ever hear a woman scream? Ha-ha."

Thick lips curled mirthfully over his blackened teeth, the executioner of Don Carlos strode off. They could hear the slither of flesh as he rubbed his hands anticipating, and the slow jangle of the ring of keys on his hip. He stopped suddenly.

"*Hsst!*" he called back to them in the cell.

They listened, Rattler John breaking off his foul oaths, the kid letting out his breath, white-faced; Diego, shambling, implacable.

"If he gets that girl to torture—" the kid began.

Then they heard it, a scream. It started jerkily, like something that expected to be choked off. Then it gathered strength as if eager to feel itself, to hear itself. It mounted, louder, higher, louder, yelling against its own doom, freighted with horror.

It was Pedro, the Mex knifeman. They could see him out there as plainly as if they stood before him. On tiptoe as the soaked rawhide began to shrink. Lashed arms writhing in pain to claw at that living serpent constricting around his windpipe, the rawhide noose. Body arched up as he sought to save his half-wrenched neck. Eyes stripped naked by fear, twisting to shoot a silent imprecation on the sun that was his executioner. Then inching up still another tiny bit on his all too short fragments of bone and flesh that supported him between life and death, his toes.

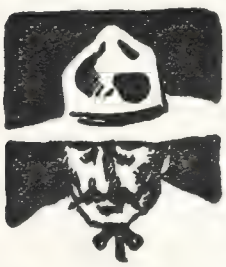
Down in the cell, the leathery Rattler clapped one paw over his red, trichinned face and ran for the back of the cell. The Rammer kid got paler, so pale he was dark. And Diego's great hands lay limp against the bars. As a Mexican, he knew Fate. But childlike, he still looked at Tige's boots. They were big, very big. And hand-tooled, too.

Tige Sweetheart Betters chuckled. He turned and bowed back toward them. "An' now, my frien's, if you'll excuse me, I'll go out and see how the patient is—"

There was a clean-cut gun report.

CHAPTER VII

SOLDIER RAMMER



IT seemed to congeal everything in that kingdom of a madman hidden away in the Chihuahua hills. Betters stood frozen. Somehow it had a different sound than just the ordinary random gunshot. There was a breathless stillness. That gunshot was labeled "enemy," "outsider."

Then there were three more, quick, harsh shots. And men were running and yelling overhead as Betters whirled and rushed out. He left the door open behind him. Something fell with a jangle. It glittered in the slanting rays of the morning sun, the ring of keys. The key for the very cell that held them.

Rattler pried between Diego's hulk and the slim kid. He stared at the keys. "Holy Gawd-d!" he moaned. And Rattler John wasn't cursing that time.

There they were like rats in a trap. Up above, somebody was fighting Don Carlos. And any enemy of the don's was an ally of theirs. A few yards away, but beyond reach as if they'd been miles, lay the keys.

A *paisano* ran past the open door. He threw a shadow across the tunnel floor. They could see that he was stumbling, wounded. He passed. There was a torn cry, Mex, in a lull. Then a sombrero rolled over into the doorway. And gun smoke began to drift up over it in the sunbeam.

There was a fierce volley of gunshots, yells of command. Once, a laugh floated down to them, the slow, flat laugh of a man who cannot be hurt by death because he has come to die. And Henry Rammer fell back with a stricken look as he heard it, then hurled himself forward and thrust his ear between the bars as if he must not miss a thing.

"What ess—" Diego began.

A blurred, wild outburst of firing blanked his query. It waned. Through it cut the slow, regular firing of somebody.

"He's alone!" the kid gasped.

"He ess protect my sometheen' now as he fights," Diego said. "He ees picking them off. Hear?"

"Why don't the dam' fool come in here an' get us out. Then—" Rattler raged.

"Looka there!" the kid cried.

A foot had crushed down on the discarded *mozo's* hat in the doorway. A slender, dainty, woman's foot. It could be but one woman. She backed through the doorway, pausing a moment, her body shutting out the sunlight. She turned and hurried toward them, Donna Lisa, Mary Lewis of the Panhandle country. Her arms were weighted down by gunbelts.

"Here! Here!" She thrust them through the bars eagerly, then drew three six-guns from her silken blouse. "Here! More!"

BREATHLESSLY she told them. One man had cut his way into the stronghold of Don Carlos. One man alone. They didn't know how he'd gotten in, but he'd come shooting when he struck. And the plodding peons had broken before him. Don Carlos himself was slightly wounded. Two of his gringo gunhands had been dropped.

"The one man?" the kid burst.

"I don't know. He—he's not young. And—and he's a shooting fool—must come from Texas. And he's tall and straight."

The shooting grew more muffled, less regular, even as she spoke. The straight-backed stranger had shot his way into the *hacienda* itself. Marched right up to it, calm and deliberate, she said.

The kid's eyes glittered behind his glasses at that.

"He's inside now. I think he wants to get Carl. I got these guns from peons who were shot. I wish I could do more." Her large eyes grew wider, then she winked. "When they come for you, they'll get a little surprise now!"

She was trying to be gay. But she felt they were still doomed just as the lone wolf bearding Don Carlos in his den was.

For a long moment, they stood and moved like men in a trance. The reprieve had stunned them. Then, the kid, gripping one of her hands, remembered. He took command.

"The keys—on the floor—up near the entrance."

"Gawd, yeah, the keys!" Rattler snarled.

She turned and uttered a sob of joy as she saw them. Halfway to them, almost within reach of them, she froze. A *durado,* with green pants like Estevan's, loomed in the doorway. He saw the keys, too.

"Don't move." Little Rammer's voice was quiet, level.

"*Dios,* you cannot do eet—" Diego started.

The girl was between them and the spic in the doorway. Only inches of him showed beyond the girl's slim body. If the kid shot, it would be endangering the body of the girl he loved. It would take iron nerves and—

The crashing thunder of the gunshot in the confine of the low-ceiled dungeon deafened them. They didn't hear the girl's sharp cry, the bleat of the struck Mex. He folded up and she seized the keys. Back at the cell, she tried four in the door. None worked. Then the fifth did, with a wrench of rust-eaten bolts.

The door swung open and the three condemned men swooped out, Rammer in the van. The hulking Diego swept past him as he turned to speak to the girl. The kid brushed back his yellow hair. He was steady and untrembling.

"The climate's going to be warm outside, kid," he told her.

She smiled that quirking little smile. "I guessed that myself." She drew another gun from her blouse, spun the cartridge chamber expertly, cocked the hammer. "So I'm dressed for warm weather and—"

The kid said something like "The hell y' are!" and snatched the gun from her.

She bridled. "See here, young man, nobody's ever bossed me yet! Give me back that gun—"

"Then it's time you *were* bridle-broke." Guns rattled outside and he slid his fingers under her stubborn chin and lifted it.

Their eyes locked, fenced. He kissed her. Her mouth hit his like a blow. She didn't try to dodge. He pinioned her a moment, then let her go. Let her go to swing her through the open cell door, slam it, then twisted the key and pushed the ring of them in his pocket. To move away from her was like tearing something inside him. There had been a final second of that kiss when she hadn't been fighting him.

He went down the tunnel swiftly, chin high, a slight little gent, the Colt spiking from his hand seeming to dwarf him. He adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses more firmly.

"Hank!" she cried after him.

He stepped out into the open.

DON DIEGO, two-bit, bragging spic bandido, had two guns peeping from his brown paws. They made chop-chop noises. One got empty and he threw it in a *mozo's* teeth. The man went over backward as if he'd been kicked by a burro. Another rushed at Diego, and he kicked him in the belly. Diego was laughing and roaring and having a hell of a good time. Blood spurted through his sleeve and he laughed louder.

Rattler John came along a little behind him and to the left. His gun snapped around like a snake head, coughed, and when it coughed, it spurted death or something mighty close. Rattler was hunched like a giant frog.

That was what the Rammer kid saw when he stepped out. He blinked owlishly. He began to walk forward, steadily, very straight, very deliberate. His gun swung at his side. In his other hand, he held a dangling cartridge belt. His back was stiff like a marching soldier's. He went past Rattler John as the latter rammed home fresh shells, past the shuffling Diego.

One of them yelled through the crackle of guns. But Hank Rammer marched on. There was a dead calico pony sprawled in the courtyard of the *hacienda.* Young Rammer knew that pony. It belonged to

Soldier Rammer, his dad. So he kept walking toward the *hacienda.*

"*Amigo,*" Diego bellowed, "they weel keel—"

The kid marched on. Lead geysered earth near his feet. He lifted his Colt and fired. A *mozo* slumped over the edge of the *hacienda* veranda. Another rose and sighted down the barrel of a shotgun. Sunlight slanted along it. Something else did too. He flopped beside his comrade. Young Rammer's gun had smoked a second time.

Don Carlos' *mozos* were in the *hacienda.* More lurked around one wing. Others raked the embattled three on the flank, from the cover of the peon adobes on the south. There were some of those gunhands there, too. They were too distant for accurate shooting.

But none of them wanted to venture into the open. The lone wolf who'd come in on the calico pony had taught them a lesson. Lest they forget, there were many sprawled forms, barefooted, straw sombreros rolled from their heads, in the courtyard.

And the yellow-headed kid seemed to bear a charmed life. He walked closer. He had but two slugs left in his gun. He turned and slammed one in deadly fashion into the handful who came around the end of the *hacienda.*

A *mozo's* arms went up, his head down. "*Madre de Dios,*" were his last words, the end of them gasped into the dirt.

Three men around him went over very suddenly as if he'd pulled them down by invisible strings. Diego and Rattler John were coming up behind the kid. Diego whipped around, snaked a third gun from his waistband and raked the row of peon huts.

Two of Don Carlos' gringo gun-buzzards had appeared there. One of them ran around, grabbing at his guts. The other skulked away between two of the dobies. Already, bent *mozos* were slipping away, down the rutted trail toward the desert, out into the brush of the mesa. It was not good to be around those hot-headed gringos. They were peaceful hombres, these *mozos,* grateful to be allowed to herd their goats and gather their faggots in peace. If those malo hombres wished to fight and fire guns, they would not interfere. *Dios,* no.

There was a bawl of pain. And red-faced Rattler John fell back, scrabbling like a crab. One side of his face ran crimson. His three chins quivered. And he sought to load frantically. He kept backing, fearful now that his guns were empty.

A *paisano* yelled a triumphant curse. The yellow-haired one who'd seemed to bear a charmed life—he'd struck him. The shot caught the Rammer kid in the gun arm. It spun him half around. But that didn't stop the son of Soldier Rammer. Quickly but without sign of panic, he shifted the gun to his other hand.

"*Hola,* you sons of dogs!" Diego bellowed as he tramped past him. His Colt blurted and the one who'd hit the kid paid—with interest. Rammer was about to face around toward the *hacienda* again. Then he saw it. Rattler John and Tige "Sweetheart" Betters.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DON'S BARGAIN

RATTLER, bloody-faced, had fallen back too close to the row of peon huts. They thought they'd emptied those adobes. They hadn't. Betters, the breed, had been in one. And Don Carlos' torturer had slipped up behind the red-faced gunman. Betters' own weapon was empty. He leaped with flailing gun. Rattler turned at the last instant. The blow caught him on the shoulder. Then they were locked, grappling, both of them struggling for the Rattler's loaded weapon.

They staggered as they wrestled. And slowly but steadily they worked past the line of dobies, past the pitiful figure of Pedro beneath the scaffold, toward that pit. Firing abruptly broke off. All eyes watched. For the powerful breed was working Rattler John toward the torture he'd prepared for him, the snake pit.

Rattler, with a swift glimpse over his

shoulder, suddenly realized. He tried to tear free, dropping his gun, fighting with tooth, nail and feet. Betters' chuckle rattled out. He clutched Rattler John Jones about the waist, hugged him to him, then began to walk the remaining yards.

Diego breathed a curse, started to run. But it was too far to risk a shot and too late to reach them. Diego froze in mid-stride.

They were at the rim of the pit. Rattler John uttered a cry that wasn't human. His body convulsed in one tremendous effort. Tige "Sweetheart" Betters chuckled again. Rattler went up, up, over his head. Then he flung him. And Betters, the shaven-headed breed, started to step back, roaring with mirth.

But he laughed too soon. A desperate, clawing arm flung from Rattler's hurtling body. Rattler's hand fastened on the breed's bandana. And even as the form of the red-faced giant vanished, Betters was jerked off his feet. The last seen of him was his flying boots.

Diego and the Rammer kid started to run. Lead from the *hacienda* halted them, made them turn and fire.

Then everything was frozen into immobility again except eyes and turning heads. In the silence, the whispering hiss of dozens of rattlesnakes filled the air. *Mozos* crossed themselves. A Mex woman began to keen some place. And the shaven head of Betters appeared at the rim of the pit. His face was a mask of torture.

He was dragged back. It must have been Rattler John's hands on his boot. He slipped from sight. And the sound like hissing steam or wind in dead mesquite doubled.

One who had insulted the house of Velasquez and Corilla had paid.

DIEGO bounded forward and seized the kid with fingers digging into his shoulder. The *mozos* strung along the *hacienda* veranda were too close. Others had taken heart and begun to come around the end of the big dobie building once again. Diego and the Rammer kid, forced to load as they went, could not hold them. Diego dragged the kid back.

Their guns barked slowly, holding the *mozos* from rushing them. A thin one jumped from cover, waving a rifle and bidding his mates charge. A slug from Diego's gun that jetted the dust near his bare toes drove him to cover and to silence. Then the kid ripped from his grip and froze like a stricken thing.

A man had appeared in the doorway of the *hacienda*. A gaunt man, stumbling, head lolling, clawing at thin air to hold himself up. A gun sagged from one hand. He kept making spasmodic attempts to jab shells into it with the other. But he couldn't quite make it. He was badly hit.

"Dad!" the Rammer kid yelled.

The man in the doorway looked up. He straightened, back stiffening until he stood soldierlike. It was Soldier Rammer himself, the kid's father. He was the one who'd escaped from Don Carlos' *dorados* at the *Casa dos Perditos* to wander out on the desert wounded.

They'd thought no man could live on that desert, afoot and wounded. Soldier Rammer had; he was the breed. He might have found a desert rat's shack or something. Anyway, he'd come back. Cut through Don Carlos' guards singlehanded. Shot his way into the *hacienda* of the don himself to get at the man. Now he stood in the doorway, wounded, helpless.

The kid called again. "Dad!"

Soldier Rammer saw him then. He took a step, staring. He was at the backs of the *mozos* along the veranda. But when they spotted him.

Diego saw that. With a roar, he was past the kid and shooting as he rushed on the *hacienda*. Hank Rammer followed him. Their lead cut a swathe to the right and the left of Soldier Rammer as he stumbled down the steps and out toward them. The kid flung his arms around his father. And they began to retreat.

"The dobies, *amigo!*" Diego ordered.

With the kid half carrying his dad, they got to them, stepped over the form of a peon sprawled in the entrance of the end one, went inside. Soldier dropped into a chair and stared at the bowl of

half-eaten tortillas on the makeshift table.

Father and son eyed each other, grinned sheepishly, as Diego stationed himself at a glassless window. Those two Rammers were ashamed of their emotion. It grew quiet as the firing fell off.

The kid looked around for some water. "Mabbe I ought to patch you up some—"

Soldier shook his graying head. "It's all right, son." His mouth worked. He was cashing his chips and he knew it. "Ha. They tell me the grub is rotten on this spread."

THE kid sleeved something that rolled down his cheek and nodded. "Uh-huh." He paused as Diego's gun snarled twice. "We had filet of sole a la Rio last night and the sauce was very poor. I was thinkin' of speaking to the management."

"Very tough hombre to speak to, the management. He—" Soldier broke off with a wry grimace. He pressed a leathery hand over his chest. When the kid wanted to do something for him, Soldier shook his head.

After a while: "I got it from *Madre* Flynn yuh was here. Very tough gettin'—"

It was still for a minute or so. Soldier tautened. So did the other two. A cry floated on the air, a cry neither human nor animal, something undead. It was Pedro.

"He ees a rat an' he make noise like wan," Diego pronounced. So saying, he moved to the back window whence he could see Pedro who was being hung by inches. Pedro had only one big toe on the ground now. Diego leveled his Colt over the dobie sill, breathed, *"Sangre de Christo!"* and fired. The howl died. It was an act of mercy.

The second man who had insulted Don Carlos had paid.

When the kid turned back, he saw that the third was about to. Soldier Rammer had risen to stand straight-backed, smiling a little, looking levelly at something neither the kid nor Diego could see. Perhaps it was the long, long trail he was about to take.

"He's whipped me, that Carlos. . . . But I got the last laugh. I got a son who's a man. He never can have—'cause he ain't, himself."

Soldier sat down. He crossed his legs. The smile on his hard-bitten face grew. Finally it widened so that the querley fell from his lips. But the smoke from it still wreathed around his head. And Don Diego blessed himself slowly. That smoke reminded him of the halo things around the heads of the statues in the little church at the crossroads in San Jacinto.

The third who'd insulted a cowhand called Carlos Corilla had paid.

The kid slowly rammed fresh shells into his gun, picked his dad's off the table reverently and loaded that, too. He picked them up, threw back his head.

"I'll be seeing you some time, Diego." He marched for the door.

Diego put his huge hulk in front of him. But when he peered into the kid's eyes, he stepped back. "All right-t." He nodded. "Some of them *mozos*, they down by that dobie on the end. I take care of them. Sure. Me, I don' like the smell in thees place. I theenk I go, too. Why nots?" He bumped the slight, bespectacled kid with his shoulder and winked: "You an' me, huh?"

Young Rammer nodded. He looked back at his dad. Then he led the way into the open. A rifle barked from a window of the *hacienda*. Adobe chipped from the wall beside them. The kid marched straight ahead. Diego lounged along beside him, a-grin, Colt dangling carelessly in his big paw.

"Gettin' hot, ain't it? Maybe we have some rain before night, hey?"

"She'll get hotter first," the kid said. He ran his sleeve over his spectacles.

Then he halted. And so did the lumbering Diego. The kid's hand fumbled over his pocket where the keys were. They were still there. And during the fighting, he'd watched that cellar entrance; no one had gone in.

Slowly he half guessed at it. There was some way of getting to that dungeon from the *hacienda* above. And Carlos had

other keys. For Don Carlos de Velasquez y Corilla stood in the doorway of the *hacienda*. And beside him, defiant but helpless, was the Donna Lisa, Mary Lewis of the Panhandle country, in the grip of two of his *dorados*.

"You will drop your weapons," Don Carlos commanded.

CHAPTER IX

Death in the Bull-Pen

DIEGO and young Hank Rammer were back in that cell. Don Carlos had delivered his terms. Two who'd treated him like a dog had died, died whining like rats, fearing. But Soldier Rammer had died with honor, like a fighting man, boots on, gun in his paw. And that did not satisfy that madman.

The son of Soldier Rammer would take his place in the bull-pen as Don Carlos had planned for Soldier. If he did not care to, if he chose to smoke it out—and one-time Carlos Corilla had swung his gun on the girl.

Down in the cell, the kid actually shuddered as he remembered the mad light in Don Carlos' eyes. His woman had betrayed him, had aided his sworn enemies, had sought to cheat him out of a vengeance hoarded through the years of search and preparation. He would have shot Mary.

So they were back in the cell.

A tiny peon had come down and bandaged the kid's wounded arm with surprising expertness. Food had been brought in, as well as a bottle of excellent wine. Now they waited.

"I'm damn sorry, Diego," the kid said, "that I had to drag you into this. I—"

Diego looked up from the corner where he sat shining his scuffed boots with spit and a shirt sleeve. "You shuddup! Eef we had some cards, I would show you some theengs. Me, I am the bes' dam' poker player in the State of Chihuahua. Wan time, me an' Pancho Villa was waitin' for a train. We played ante an' I won his army. But I give it back to hem an' he tol' me, Pancho deed, 'Diego,' he tol' me, 'Diego, you are the bes' dam'—' "

They came for the kid then, the last of the gringo gunhands and two *dorados*, one of whom limped. The latter pulled off the kid's glasses and tried them on awkwardly. He gave them back with a grin.

Diego shuffled from a dark corner of the cell, hand working inside his shirt as if he had a flea. Don Carlos' men followed them out carelessly. After all, the little gringo and the giant Mex had been disarmed before.

They went out into the sunlight and across the blood-stained cobbles of the courtyard, past the adobe hovels, past the scaffold where Pedro had paid. They went around the stable. And at the irate hammering of the black bull's hoofs against the wall, the men snickered.

"That bool—he ees good as dead," Diego snarled.

The kid placed a cigarette in his mouth and lit it with firm hands. He was whiter than a sheet. But he wasn't afraid—even though he knew now he'd inherited his father's fear. He marched on.

Then he stood at the gate at one end of the *torril*, the huge corral. Across it, he could see a handful of peon's urging the black bull into the pen outside the gate. Down on the west side sat Don Carlos, Dona Lisa on his right, the hulk of Diego on his left. Around were bunched a handful of his *dorados*. They sat in a small, rude stand.

Everything was being done as much like a formal bull-fight as possible. A *muleteer* rode into the *torril* on a flea-bitten burro. Picadors with beribboned darts lurked along the rails on spavined broomtails. A bowlegged *mozo* fitted an old bugle to his lips and made a flat blast. Where Don Carlos, one-time cowhand, had learned those things was a mystery.

The chute gate went up. The little, glistening skinned bull, who'd put to rout the pick of Mexico City's toreadors, stood snorting with lowered horns. The *mozos* began to yell at him.

A QUIVER ran through the slim form of the son of Soldier Rammer. He knew fear in that instant—terrible, lancing fear that speared straight through his heart. Then he steadied, just a white-faced youngster with torn, bloody suit and a pair of glasses. He pushed back his yellow hair as he gazed down toward where the girl sat, immobile, blanched.

It was all a nightmare. A mad Spanish nobleman who'd been a mangy cowhand. A girl from the Panhandle. Vengeance and torture that might have sprung straight from the rack-rooms of the Spanish Inquisition. It could not happen in this modern day. But here it was, a nightmare perhaps, but real, terribly real, as real as the memory of that kiss.

In the crude stand, gigantic Diego turned to the slim, proud Carlos. "*Senor*, you geeve your word—"

Don Carlos looked through Diego's forehead. "I will keep the agreement. After he goes to meet the bull, the lady"—he refused to call her his wife any longer—"she will be escorted to the border. *Si.* If he lives, he, too, is free. But he will not live." He lifted his chin haughtily. "The word of a Corilla has been sufficient for kings."

Diego calmly plucked one of those slim *cigarros* from the don's pocket. "Where the hell are those keengs now, hey? You got a match?"

There was a shout. *El Diable,* the bull, had pranced mincingly into the ring. The *muleteer* beat his bare heels against the burro's flanks, rode toward the circling bull. The bull heard him and whirled. The *mozo* went over the fence in one dive. When *El Diablo* got his horns into the paralyzed burro, it wasn't nice.

Don Carlos rose, slim, gloating, and bade his picadors harry the bull. They started to.

That was as far as they got. That little bull was playing for "keeps." He got his reddened horns into one of those broomtails. Its rider got clear and scrambled over the rails. The rest quit. Don Carlos rose again and poured forth epithets. Then he beckoned toward the kid's end of the *torril.*

A *mozo* stepped forward, handed him a red blanket and a hacked sword. The kid took off his glasses, blinked and put them back on again. The *mozo* looked disappointed.

Then Henry Rammer walked straight through the gate and out into the ring. He knew he was to die. It was just as well to look facts in the face. He was determined on just one thing. He'd show no fear. Don Carlos would be cheated at last.

There was a tiny, woman's sob in the terrible stillness.

And *El Diablo* charged. The best *matadors* had hunted fence before that charge. The son of Soldier Rammer didn't. He threw away the sword that was clumsy for him. He bundled the red blanket into a wad, waited, then tossed it point-blank into the black bull's face. And he dived, grabbing for the horns to bulldog the beast.

He might have done it. But his boot caught something, slipped. He got one horn. *El Diablo* leaped straight up into the air. And, coming down, his sharp-shod hoofs hit man-flesh. The kid went to the ground like something mangled. But he rolled, rolled as a good bronc-buster does when he's tossed by a bad horse. And *El Diablo* churned dirt with his cutting forelegs.

The kid was up, dragging one leg a little. Red ran from his mouth. *El Diablo* circled, weaved, then came in. The kid bulldogged him again, got both horns that time. *El Diablo* bellowed with rage and pain as his neck was wrenched around. They went to the ground. And the black bull cried "uncle" as teeth sank into his ear.

THE animal threshed. And the kid was too weak to keep him down. But the son of Soldier Rammer was a heady fighter. He leaped out from under, got his feet under him, looked around. There was that sword he'd discarded. He grabbed it up. *El Diablo* rolled over.

Before he could get up, he was being beaten over the head with that dull-edged, but sharp-pointed sword. He scrambled to his hoofs and got away

from that. The little black bull was puzzled. This earbiting, this beating—all was new to him. Then blood ran over his nose. And he tasted it. And he understood. Men did that to you. They made you bleed. And after the blood—came death, if they could deliver that. But none had—with him. It had remained for *El Diablo* himself to deliver it. He remembered now. He came in.

Half crouched, glasses gone, peering, the kid waited. He had to wait for the bull to get close until he moved. Without the spectacles, he was handicapped—unless he chose to flee.

There was a cry from the *mozos* at the quick swish of *El Diablo's* tail. They knew what that had meant; they had seen. The kid flailed with that sword, missed. For the little black bull had shifted his stride. It was almost human, like a skip. It had baffled the best trainers up on the Aragon bull farm, spelled death for the matadors.

And *El Diablo* found Rammer with his horns. There was a guttural bellow of well-feeling. Then the kid went up into the air. He landed, lay prone and still. The bull, first picking up his forefeet daintily, then tearing earth as he gathered momentum, charged. His horns drooped. So had passed Posilato, king of the Mexico City toreadors.

But the son of Soldier did not go so easily. His narrowed eyes watched, inches from the earth. He saw the gleam of the sun on that lethal, black and arched back. And at the last minute, he rolled.

El Diablo's horns found thin air. And he stampeded past, enraged. He whirled, incredibly quick. And then it became a sickening game with time as the sole opponent. For Hank Rammer was doomed, as surely facing death as if fronted by a firing squad.

Once, he was backed close to the *torril* fence. He turned and saw it. But he refused to mount it. That was what Don Carlos wanted.

El Diablo caught the kid twice more as the latter dodged and laughed in tearing gasps of breath. And the second time—it wasn't good to see. Little Rammer stayed down. He lay very still, clutching at a hole over his ribs. He was twisted and disheveled and torn.

The black bull described a wide circle around him. He too was weary and heaving. His head hurt from the beatings of that sword. His slim forelegs quivered; it was tiring to miss so many rushes. He turned at the long, thin scream of the woman outside the rail. He was used to cascades of noise. But that—

Then he braced his forelegs wide, dropped his horns. He pawed a little, snorting. The next charge would be the death-rush. The black animal hesitated, breathing. He paused to gloat like something human. He hated the man smell; he liked the smell of a man's blood more. His evil-set eyes watched as the figure on the ground raised to one knee, got half erect. That black bull held a lot of hate.

CHAPTER X

The Biggest Liar!

IN the stand, Don Carlos rose suddenly, stiff, quivering. The unkempt, leering Diego appeared to have him by the elbow. But Don Carlos knew better; he felt that round, steel-hard thing in his side.

Diego said something. Carlos Corilla yellowed around the lips. For a split-second, he was like that craven hombre who'd ridden and skulked on cow-spreads years before. Then his lean head went up and back.

"Si." That was all he said. He walked down to the rails of the *torril*. Climbing through them, he hesitated. Diego was talking.

"You make any-y mees-takes, señor—an' me, Diego, I know some treeks 'bout honee an' ants—after I shoot you. Sure."

El Diablo spotted Don Carlos. It was too late then for Carlos to back down. The black bull sniffed questioningly. This wasn't how things should be done. There were many men in the ring at first. But at the end there should be only one and him. He was suspicious.

Straight as a lance, slim as a rapier, Don Carlos de Velasquez y Corilla trod into the center of the *torril*. He walked like a man in a dream—or, perhaps, an actor. *El Diablo*, motionless, followed his every movement. And as the Rammer kid staggered to his feet, Don Carlos picked up the red blanket, then the sword.

High, motionless, he held the sword above his head. Then he bowed toward Donna Lisa. *El Diablo* snorted. It was his answer to the challenge. He knew those slim-hipped, gliding movements, the practised swing of the red cloth. He rushed, passing within feet of the kid as he blindly made his way toward the fence. This new antagonist was the one to be feared. The one to be tamed.

It was a beautiful and a deadly picture. The reckless flaunt of the red cloth, the horn-armed rush, the sliding motion of the slim legs, the whirl of the white head. And the black devil rushing by harmlessly. But it was not for long. *El Diablo* was too much the born master. Don Carlos was an old man, a man who cared not much for life any more. He had been cheated in his vengeance. A woman had chosen other than him.

SCARCE ten yards apart, bull and man faced each other, quivering, girding. In that frozen instant, both were aristocrats. The bull pawed. The slim-hipped man flirted the now-ragged red cloth at him.

El Diablo came in. The red cloth billowed out to guide the charge of his horned-head. And the slender Carlos, unbending, poise unbroken, swayed his body scant inches sideward, sword hand stemmed in disdain on his hip.

And the black bull outwitted him then. It took the red cloth with a curveting, wheeling motion, seeming to half pivot on its forelegs as it struck. From thence its charge carried, carried through the cloth and into the flesh of Carlos Corilla.

At the first touch of the goring, Don Carlos went up on his toes, body a quivering, stark thing, sword perpendicular in his two hands. And it drove down between the bull's shoulders as the horns went home.

The don fell. And *El Diablo* foundered past him, dying on his fet. It was swift then. Carlos rose, swaying, the life tide running out of him. The litle black bull staggered around for one more charge.

On the fence, the Rammer kid dug in a pocket and pulled out a black case. It was a second pair of glasses. And by some miracle, they were unbroken. He slipped them on, then reached toward one of the don's stunned *mozos* and yanked his gun.

The son of Soldier brushed his yellow hair off his forehead, wetted his lips. He fired. The black bull took two lunging strides, then dropped like a rock. Out in the center of the *torril*, Don Carlos de Velasquez y Corilla turned, once more stemmed his pale hand on his hip, bowed.

He never straightened from that bow. . . .

It was sunset, the shadows of dusk already encroaching upon the trail where the mesquite thickened. The *mozo* appeared to doze as he guided the buckboard. Behind, Don Diego patted his new boots. They felt good on his feet. And they were hand-tooled, too. The snake-pit had been a precarious job. But Diego hadn't stolen the boots. Tige "Sweetheart" Betters would have no need for them now.

He grinned as he gazed into the buckboard. The Rammer kid was stretched on blankets. And his head was in the lap of Donna Lisa, one-time Mary Lewis from the Panhandle. The kid would be all right when they got him to a doctor.

The voices of the girl and boy drifted back to him. "Funny how he went out to die—just like a regular aristocrat."

Diego grinned some more. His hand went under his shirt as if he had a flea. It brought out a gun, a quite empty gun. It was the one the girl had brought them that night, without cartridges. They had left it behind in the cell when they'd gone out to fight. When he and the kid had been put back there, Diego had recovered it.

"Sure," he told the pony he sat. "A hombre he go out to die dam' well when the gon, she tickle hees rib when he don't know that gon ain't empty. Why nots?"

Bronc Bait

He toppled from the saddle.

By JOE ARCHIBALD

Author of "Ballot Foxes," etc.

Brick Masson had good reason to remember that black horse. And just as good a reason to remember its big slit-eyed rider. Thousands of miles of range and several years separated those memories. But on that bullet-blasted day in Concha those memories were ripped out of the past.

BRICK MASSON pulled up the head of his bald-faced bay with a sharp jerk as the rider just ahead of him stiffened in the saddle and clapped a hand to the holster at his side.

"What ails yuh, Hop? I didn't hear nothin'. Looks like yuh got the jumps for fair."

"Guess yuh're right, Brick," the lean-jawed rider acknowledged huskily, "but I ain't used tuh playin' nursemaid tuh ten thousand dollars in greenbacks."

"Better not mention it," Brick warned. "Not even in a whisper. Even the rocks hereabouts have ears. Come on, we got a lot of travelin' ahead. We're only maybe an hour out of Concha."

The dark purple shadows among the mountain crags above them began to lengthen and widen as the two young deputies rode down the gully, over the hill-saddle and across the flats above. Neither Brick Masson nor Hop Eldred had been a deputy for long. Not three hours before Dan McClintock, sheriff of Concha, had sworn them in at his bedside. Lumbago had laid the fuming old lawman low.

"I reckon the committee knew what they was doin'," old Dan had told them. "But I dunno. Maybe them badmen won't figger two yearlin's like you would be totin' all that dinero. But they seem tuh know everythin'. Reckon they might even know that all this money is going to the bank at Ord's Junction." Then the old sheriff had issued a final bit of advice to his two deputies. "Better take a long way 'round," was the substance of it. "Don't foller the stage route or I reckon yuh'll be feedin' buzzards before mornin'."

The pessimistic oration had indeed been warranted. For over a month now

Rimrock County had been the stamping ground of an invisible evil element that possessed an uncanny faculty of knowing just when and where to strike. Concha and its outlying districts had felt the scourge worst.

Three killings and four robberies had prompted the citizens of the town to form a vigilance committee but even that grim league had failed to function. Two days after its inception the stage from Ord's Junction had been held up three miles out of town.

The deputies, Brick Masson and Hop Eldred, were thinking of all this when they rode across the flats. Their eyes, hidden by the shadows cast by their wide-brimmed hats, strayed furtively over the grim terrain.

"Looks like it might rain, huh?" said Brick as he gazed up at the tumbling clouds. "Kinda feel it." He grinned, leaned over and rubbed his right leg just above the knee. "Some weather man I am, yeah. A horse kicked me once back in Montana—"

"Somebody's tippin them coyotes off," Hop broke in. "Don't yuh think so, Brick?"

"Maybe," came from Brick as the trail dipped toward a shallow stream with willows lining its banks. "I hope they figure this dinero went out on the stage. Only the committee knew we were sent. Now if yuh was a malo hombre, Hop, yuh'd never think tuh look at us two young squirts that we'd be carryin' greenbacks, would yuh? I reckon the committee was smart when they thought up that one. An' who'd think we was headed for Ord's, huh?"

The riders reined to the right and headed for an opening in the willows. Here, apparently, was the spot that served as a ford when the stream was swollen. The horses sploshed through the drought-sucked stream bed and were laboring up a steep slope when Brick Masson caught a movement from the tail of his eye. No sooner had he twisted in his saddle than his face went gray. A warning cry burst from his tight lips. He clawed for his gun.

"Hop, look out!" Even as the cry tore out, Brick knew that it was wasted. A gun boomed. Hop Eldred swayed in his kak, clutched at his chest, and toppled. His six-gun blazed a bullet into the ground.

In those fleeting seconds before another stab of flame belched from the shadows cast by the willows Brick Masson saw three shadowy forms. He knew, before his gun was half drawn, that his doom was sealed. But as the roar of the second six-gun shattered the stillness, Brick's horse reared up, spun on its hind legs. He flew out of the saddle, crashed to the ground. His last conscious thought for many minutes was that the bullet had not hit him. The horse had pitched just as the gun had stabbed flame.

Brick Masson's fingers clawed in the mud. A groan escaped his parched lips as his lean body twitched. Slowly his eyes opened but he shut them quickly to ease the stabbing pain in his head. He became conscious at last that his cheek was pressing into wet loam. So he was alive! Bewildered, the young deputy lifted himself on one elbow and strove to find a reason for his being where he was. Bit by bit the events of the afternoon assembled themselves into a neat pattern in his mind.

Stark realization came. He had been thrown clear, had struck his head on a tree root. The outlaws, whoever they were, had taken it for granted that their bullets had both found marks. Perhaps they had been in too much of a hurry to take the trouble to examine their victims. Greed for the big bundle of currency had been uppermost in their minds.

Brick gritted his teeth; clambered to his feet. Drunkenly he staggered toward the mucky stream bed, there to stand reeling while he looked around wildly.

"Hop?" he cried hoarsely. "Where—" His pain-drugged eyes became affixed to something. A heap on the ground, a horse nudging it with his nose. The animal nickered when it saw Masson. Brick knew that Hop Eldred was dead even before he knelt down beside the body. Hop had been shot in the back.

"Yuh didn't git a chance, Hop," he forced out between clenched teeth. "The

dirty—" Suddenly he reached inside Hop's vest. And as he made the gesture he knew that the money would not be there.

Brick got up, stood looking down at what was left of Hop Eldred. "Figger we was some dumb, huh? Gittin' bushwhacked thataway, Hop. Just a couple of squirts. But I'm not through, boy. I'll square things for us both." He turned and made his uncertain way toward the bed of the thin stream. There he fell face down and splashed water against the bruise just over his temple. The cool muddy liquid revived him, soothed the throbbing of his head.

Returning strength enabled Brick to lift the body of Hop Eldred from the ground and to place it across the saddle of his mount. Having secured it with a rope, he snagged his own bay and climbed to the saddle.

The town of Concha was humming with activity when Brick Masson, face white, eyes as cold and deadly as those of a basilisk, rode through the scattered shacks on the outskirts and headed toward the main street. A ribald song came from the direction of the saloon and drowned out the rumble of voices. As Masson's horse clippity-clopped slowly through the rutted street, a big form slipped from a knot of citizens and swung off the porch steps.

"You—Brick?" a voice cut the air shrilly.

There was no response. The horseman sat in his saddle like a wooden Indian, as trap-lipped as the thing draped over the horse trailing behind.

"Brick Masson's back!" a man yelled. A crowd of revelers tumbled from the saloon. White, tense faces surveyed Brick as he swung from his horse.

"Get Seth Ludd," he said stonily. "I reckon I got bad news. Yuh kin see me an' Hop never got tuh Ord's. Hop'll never git no place. He got it in the back!"

Hissing breaths punctuated his statement. With the speed of grass fire the word spread. All of Concha had the news when Brick Masson shuffled listlessly into the room where old Dan McClintock lay. The sheriff struggled up from his pillow, eyes throwing sparks.

"They got yuh, Brick!" he snapped. "I knew somehow. Even before yuh got here. Hop—"

Masson nodded, swallowing hard. "I tell yuh somebody tipped 'em off," he flared suddenly. "Somebody in Concha! Dan, we made a big circle around. There wa'n't no way they could spot us goin' tuh Ord's."

Three men barged into the room just then. Seth Ludd, head of the vigilantes, stared at Brick with eyes as hard as flint.

"The money?" he demanded. "They didn't—"

Again Brick Masson merely nodded.

"Mighty funny," Ludd lashed out. He was a tall, dark-visaged man with a face that seemed to have been carved out of an oak stump. Seth Ludd was a power in Concha. The town's saloon and biggest part of the business block belonged to him.

"Seems like I mentioned at the meetin'," he said after a pause, "that the committee was a little hasty about pickin' the men for this job, sheriff. Masson here was only a saddle tramp six months ago. It would've been easy to frame this thing up. He—"

Brick whirled, face livid. "Yuh insinuatin' anythin', Ludd?" he cracked. "Are yuh accusin' me?"

"There couldn't be no leak," Ludd roared. "We had men outside the windows who belonged to the vigilantes to guard against anybody who figured on listenin' in. Nobody could've known you an' Hop Eldred was carryin' that dinero!"

A man struck Masson's arm aside as the young deputy reached for his gun. Ludd backed against the door, fingers splayed. A laugh dropped from his thin lips.

"That's enough, Ludd," Sheriff McClintock growled, struggling up on one elbow. "I know Brick Masson. He wouldn't—"

"Where was Hop's gun?" Ludd queried next. "He didn't have it when we looked him over. Maybe he tried tuh save himself an' snapped a shot at this

man. Masson could've shot him. He could've cleaned his gun an' snapped in a cartridge in place of—"

"Did yuh hear me?" old Dan barked. "I'm stringin' with Brick Masson, Ludd. Yuh ain't got no call to accuse him thataway. Maybe the coyotes who bushwhacked him an' Hop didn't have no idea they'd find all that money. Yuh got no proof, Ludd."

Seth Ludd shrugged, spread his hands before him. "Maybe I was a might quick, but I can't see how anybody figured the trick to the second. I'm head of this committee, don't forgit that. I got a sworn duty tuh perform. If I tramp on any hombre's toes, waal—"

Brick Masson's eyes were slits. "I savvy," he said coldly. "But don't bear down too hard, Ludd." He tore the badge loose from his shirt and tossed it onto the bedspread. "I resign," he said to Dan McClintock. "It'll make it easier for yuh. And, Ludd, I ain't forgittin' this." Brick stamped out of the room.

"Don't pay no attention tuh that jasper, Brick," said a man who had followed him out of the room. "He'd accuse his own mother, would Ludd."

"Yeah," agreed Brick, "but yuh have tuh admit it looks pretty bad. There's folks who'll begin tuh wonder. Yuh're always guilty until proved otherwise. Looks pretty ugly. Figger the only chance I'll have tuh hold up my head will be tuh find out who killed Hop." His fingers balled into fists. "An' that's what I aim tuh do," he added simply.

"Didn't see none of 'em, huh?"

"All masked," Brick said. "Got the drop on us." He headed across the street.

Four riders were pulling up in front of the hitching rack. One horse squealed as the man in the saddle yanked its head up with a vicious tug at the reins. As the black beast reared in a wild *pesade*, the rider roared with mirth. Then cursing monotonously, he fought the animal into submission.

Brick Masson stiffened in his tracks. "That bronc," he whispered hoarsely. Something stirred restlessly in Brick's mind. A vague light of wonder glowed in his eyes. "I want to get a closer look at that hombre," he murmured. He sauntered up close to the rack.

"Reckon I wouldn't git too close," a thick voice drawled. "That cayuse'll eat yuh up."

Brick Masson looked around and stared into the face of the man who had ridden the horse in. The slash of a mouth was twisted into a sneer. Deep-set eyes, peering past a thin, high-bridged nose, harbored a defiant gleam. In the gloom the man seemed to tower above young Masson. And Brick Masson was but an inch shy of six feet. Suddenly the rider leaned forward, his eyes burning into Brick's. The gash of a mouth became a tightened line and Brick thought a thin veil of alarm spread momentarily over the pale face. It was not lasting, however.

"Figger he'll ruin his teeth if he tries tuh chaw me," Brick replied amiably enough. Yet as he spoke a strange feeling crept over him, setting his blood to pounding in his veins. He could not tear his eyes away from those two which bored into him. They held a magnetic spell, stirred up ghosts from the past.

With an effort he turned away, fixed his attention upon the black horse. He walked up close, placed a hand on the black's nose. At the alien touch something seemed to explode inside the restless beast. It reared backward, squealing with rage. The hackamore at its head snapped like so much rotten string.

"Look out, Buck!" yelled a man from the group which had poured out of the saloon. "Look out!"

Eyes wild, ears laid back, the horse screamed viciously and plunged at Brick Masson. Mouth open and slavering, the beast lunged with flailing front feet. Brick turned to run, slipped and sprawled in the dirt. A man stepped in, cracked the beast on the nose with a quirt. A howl of rage welled up and the owner of the black reached for his gun.

"Hit that bronc once more, any of yuh, an'—"

Brick Masson was on his feet, face livid. In a flash it occurred to him that this man wanted him trampled into a pulp. His six-gun leaped to his fingers

as the horse reared on its hind legs and whirled again to the attack. A stab of flame came from the hitching rack. A bullet tore the six-gun loose from Brick's grasp, numbed his fingers. The shock of the slug threw Brick off guard, gave the killer horse its chance. Both fore hoofs came down. Brick tried to throw up his arms, too late. An iron-shod hoof grazed his skull, and the young ex-deputy threw up his arms and dropped face downward.

When his senses had returned, Brick found himself propped up against the side of the saloon. A sledge-hammer seemed to be pounding the inner walls of his skull. He lifted a hand to his head. His fingers came away sticky with blood. Eyes, filmed with pain, flitted toward the faces of the people gathered around him. They seemed to bob up and down. Then a voice cut the temporary silence.

"Any other gent want tuh tease that bronc?" it clipped. "He only got what he deserved. Should've been killed!" It seemed to Brick that there was a threat in the big man's words. He struggled to stand erect. Two men held him up.

"Lucky for you, Brick," some one said. "Yore head must be iron. Only knocked yuh out for a few minutes."

"Oh, yeah?" the stunned young rider said, staring at the glittering eyes of the black bronc's master. "It ain't goin' tuh be so lucky for—"

Out of the group of citizens stepped Seth Ludd. The owner of the black straightened as he turned slowly. Ludd's eyes became lancets of steel. His jaw muscles bulged as he met the stranger's cold glance. There seemed something electrifying in the meeting. Brick Masson's spine began to creep.

"Your name's Ludd, ain't it?" asked the stranger.

"I reckon so," was the dry response. "But I don't savvy yourn?"

"Rabb," said the big man. "Hear yuh pretty near own this place. Feel like playin' a game, Ludd? A private game?"

"I'm no gambler, Rabb."

"Why that's mighty funny," Rabb retorted. "Don't make sense. Huh, I rode all the way of fifty miles tuh stack up ag'in yuh, Ludd. Of course, if yuh're afraid—"

The personality of the stranger was sinisterly magnetic. Brick felt his eyes being torn away from the man toward the black horse. The two were well mated. A riot of questions milled in the erstwhile deputy's brain. Why had that horse gone berserk without the slightest provocation? Why had Rabb made no attempt to control the lunging, rearing beast? And why had that flash of concern come to Rabb's eyes when he, Brick, had first met his glance? There were answers to these questions, Brick knew. If the ache in his head would only lessen. But Ludd's voice drew Masson's eyes away from the black horse which was stamping at the rack.

"No hombre livin' can talk tuh me like that, Rabb," the head of the vigilantes said slowly. "I call yore bluff. Any stakes yuh say and it's a private game like yuh say! Foller me."

"Now that's talkin'." Rabb turned to the men who had ridden in with him. "The rest of yuh kin paint the town red until I'm ready tuh drift." And his raucous laugh defiled the air again as he followed Seth Ludd into the saloon.

Brick Masson, a little unsteady on his feet, shouldered his way through the group of muttering, gesticulating townsmen and headed for the hitchrack. He sauntered over and looked at the horse closely. A hair bridle was on the animal's head now.

"Nice workmanship," he commented admiringly. "Few punchers can do that kind of work. Haven't got the time. An' seems like I—" Brick clamped his jaws tight and held out a hand to the restless black's nose.

"Better cóme away, Brick," a warning voice exclaimed. "Ain't yuh got any sense? Yuh want tuh git killed? Ain't once enough?"

The black's feet pawed at the air. Brick stooped swiftly and glanced at the hoofs. He straightened, and a cold bleak smile spread over his pallid face. Back over the years Brick's pain-wracked mind raced. As mental pictures began to rear up, Brick reeled, caught himself and

staggered down the street. At the edge of town he stopped in front of a shack where the Concha doctor lived. The door opened in answer to his knock.

"Feel a little whoozy," he grinned at the M. D. "Got kicked by a horse. Want yuh tuh bandage me up an' if you have a bracer handy, I'd thank yuh for it. Figger I've got work tuh do tuhnight an' want tuh be in some kind of shape."

A little while later Brick Masson lay on a bed in the doctor's shack, his nausea dispelled by a jigger of brandy and his head bandaged and cooled by soothing balm. There was a determined twist to the young ex-deputy's lips. A picture was forming in his brain. It was fully five years since he had worked as a helper in a blacksmith shop back in a small Montana town, yet the events of a certain day were clear.

A man had come into that shop, a bearded man riding a buckskin horse. He had been leading a fiery-eyed, sleek black bronc which he claimed to have just broken. He wanted it shod. The horse had been shod already but the owner said the toe-calks would have to be taken off. They interfered with the black bronc's progress by cutting into its legs. It is a peculiarity true of some horses.

Brick smiled grimly as he visualized shoeing that black bronc. The horse had almost killed him but the job had been done. A few months afterward Shag Hewes, the most notorious outlaw leader in Montana, had been captured and sentenced to Deer Lodge. The description of the man had tallied perfectly with Brick's recollection of the bearded stranger who had brought the black bronc in to be reshod. A year later Brick Masson had pulled stakes and drifted south to finally land in Concha.

"A hair bridle," he mused, lying there in the doctor's shack. "Hmm—an' no toe-calks. I wonder why that bronc is still wild like that after five years? I—" Brick's head slanted sidewise and he peered out of the open window. From where he lay he could see up the street. The town was in darkness, save for one street lamp. The light from it bathed the entrance to a narrow alley between two buildings. What was that glint?

Brick raised himself. A low cry left his lips as he saw the head and shoulders of a man loom up over the top of a pile of wooden boxes. Rolling out of bed and flattening his body against the floor took but a second. A rifle shot shattered the night.

The doctor came running into the room just as the drum of a horse's hoofs sounded in the street.

"What happened?"

"Look at the bed," replied young Masson grimly as he hugged the floor. "There ought tuh be a hole in it. Somebody seems tuh think I ain't got a right tuh live."

His host pawed at the heap of blankets, Brick assisting. The young man inserted a forefinger into a hole in the woolen covering, cursed softly.

"Reckon I was plumb lucky," he murmured. "Well, doc, I'm ready tuh move. I'm takin' a ride. Don't say anythin' tuh anybody about this. I'm goin' out tuh look at some tracks."

Running as fast as he could with his head aching as it was, Brick left the shack and headed for the hitching rack. Two men cut across his path as he made for his horse.

"In a hurry, Brick?" said one rasping voice. "Reckon we got orders tuh hold yuh in town. Ludd ain't satisfied with that story of yourn. An' he's in a bad mood, Ludd is. That cuss, Rabb, must've beat him at his game."

Brick set his jaws, spread his hands out in evident resignation. Then swiftly he struck as the men's hands left their guns. His fist cracked against the chin of the nearest guard and drove him sprawling. The other stiffened as a gun leaped to Brick's left hand.

"Throw that gun away, pronto," the erstwhile deputy rasped. "I'm headin' out!"

Seth Ludd, face twisted with fury, reached the street as Brick Masson's horse thundered out of Concha. He blazed a shot at the rider, then ripped out an oath.

"I knew it!" he raged at old Dan Mc-

Clintock who had painfully dragged himself from his bed to shuffle out into the street.

IT was two hours before dawn when Brick Masson slid from his kak, tied his mount to a tree root and advanced cautiously up to the saddle of the hill. From there he could see the willow growth along the stream where he had been ambushed with Hop Eldred several hours before.

For some time Brick lay prone, his eyes boring into the gloom. Not a soul in sight. He threw a rock down into the willows and whipped out a gun. Nothing came from this so he began to reconnoiter. In a few minutes he struck a match and held it close to the mud along the edge of the stream. A growl of frustration jerked from him. Glaring evidence that some one had been here before him met his eyes. Apparently a stick had been used in spots to obliterate any semblance of horse tracks. Brick crossed the stream, despair tearing at his heart, and climbed the opposite rise.

"An' keep movin', feller!"

Brick froze momentarily as the harsh voice cut the stillness of the night. He lifted his hands slowly and spun around. Three men, guns trained on him, stood in the shadows of the willows. Black cloth covered their faces.

"So you skunks did leave tracks there in the mud!" Brick exclaimed angrily. "Shoes without toe-calks maybe, huh?"

"Seems like mebbe if they was, wouldn't do yuh no good."

Brick Masson rode for an hour, his grim escort herding him deeper into wild country. The chill of dawn was in the air when the cavalcade rode into a narrow gulch in the hills, threaded their way up a precarious rocky trail to a clearing where a big cabin was hunched against the rocky walls. Into this Brick was led and thrust before the man who had called himself Rabb back in Concha.

"The young squirt, huh?" Rabb snapped and stung Brick with a backhand blow to the cheek. "Too bad yuh wa'n't killed the first time. Got hep about that horse, huh? Figgered yuh'd see whut kind of tracks it left out there on the creek bank. Too bad—but I figgered yuh might do that, too. Yuh see them hombres over there side of that fire? They're puttin' new shoes on that black bronc, with toe-calks! Got 'im tied down."

"Better git it over with, boss," one of the masked riders cut in. "This gent has found out too much."

"No more killin's yet."

Brick's arms were yanked behind him and his wrists bound tight with rope.

"Maybe yuh'd like tuh know that they didn't git me with that rifle," Brick said tauntingly. "Back in the doc's shack. Kinda remember me, eh, Rabb—or is it Shag Hewes I'm talkin' to? Yuh could easily have shaved that beard off, Hewes!"

The outlaw's brows knitted. "Yuh're talkin' riddles tuh me."

"Now I know where that hair bridle was made, Shag," Brick went on. "Yuh have lots of time tuh make 'em in Deer Lodge, don't yuh? An' that bronc shore would've been a little tamer by now if yuh hadn't been off of it for almost five years, eh, Shag? Get my drift? Yuh kinda recognized me, Shag, back there in Concha. Wanted the bronc tuh kill me all right. Huh, no toe-calks—"

The outlaw cracked Brick across the mouth again. "Throw him in there," he roared at his henchmen. "I'll fix him fer good when it's time tuh head out. Fire, yuh ornery coyote. Ever git burnt? Waal, when I pull out termorrer, I'm goin' tuh soak this shack with coal oil an' let yuh roast."

The prisoner pitched forward on his face as Rabb's hard-bitten cronies threw him roughly into the dark, back room. The door slammed shut and a bolt slipped into place. Brick turned over on his back and looked around. There was only one crack of light revealing the edge of a drawn window curtain. From outside in the compound came the protesting scream of the black horse as its shoes were being hammered onto its hoofs. From the next room came Shag Hewes' angry bellowing.

"No more slip-ups! We'll make plumb

shore on this last job. If that skunk in Concha does like I told 'im, the Concha bank will be emptied by termorrer night. Then we head out. We've picked this county clean. Three of yuh head out early tuh Concha an' tag the layout, get it? We ride in about six o'clock!"

Brick Masson tugged at his bonds. His head began to throb again. Finally, he lay back and rested. Seemingly it was an age before the door opened again. Shag Hewes' face leered in at Brick. The big man lifted an arm and flung something into the room.

"There's the horseshoes yuh like so much, yuh coyote."

Brick rolled out of the path of the flying metal as best he could. One of the shoes thudded against his shoulder.

"Figger the bronc is shod reg'lar now," the outlaw rapped out. Then the door slammed shut.

As dawn came an eerie silence pervaded the place. Evidently, Brick reasoned. the outlaws were getting some sleep. Slowly the interior of his prison became suffused with soft morning light and objects began to take shape. A ray of early sun seeped into the cabin room and played on a metallic object not far from Brick's head.

It was a horseshoe, worn thin. The edge seemed as sharp as a razor; it was one which had been ripped off the hoof of the black horse. Brick got to a sitting position with effort, hunched along the floor and heeled the horseshoe until it stood upright in a crack between the boards of the floor. Then he shifted his position again, raised his feet and brought his boot-heel down to wedge the shoe deeper into place.

From outside came the sound of iron-shod hoofs against shale. Voices cut the early morning air. Riders were going out. Brick grinned savagely. An hour passed. His arms ached horribly. Sweat ran into his eyes. Then just as a strand gave way, he heard a pounding on the door outside. Shag Hewes' voice ripped out testily and then Brick heard him get up and go to the door.

"Whut yuh doin' here?" Shag snarled to the intruder.

"Had tuh see yuh," a voice replied. The sound shook Brick Masson to his very soul. "Shag, I can't go through with it. I'm playin' too close now. I've done all I dare tuh do like I told yuh back in Concha."

Brick strained at his bonds. They loosened and fell away. He rubbed circulation back into his arms. Then he crept to the door and peered through a crack. Standing there facing Shag Hewes, his face drawn and set, was Seth Ludd.

"Shut up an' I'll do the talkin', Ludd!" barked Hewes. "I tell yuh I'm crackin' the bank before I leave these parts. An' lissen to this, I didn't give yuh away when they hooked me. I let yuh off with all that dinero figgerin' you'd have it when I got out. What did yuh do? Yuh bought half of Concha with it. Ludd, a sheriff back in Montana is still lookin' for the hombre that killed—"

Ludd's face went a shade whiter. "Shag, I ain't welchin'," he interrupted hastily. "I've evened it up. I've tipped yuh off tuh them jobs. Helped yuh until I'm walkin' on thin ice. Yuh got tuh pull out, I tell yuh. We're square, Shag. I ain't helpin' yuh crack the Concha Bank an' that's final."

"Yuh don't know how thin the ice is, do yuh Ludd?" sneered Shag Hewes. "I got that young squirt tied up in there. He knows that black horse. He'd ought tuh. It's almost killed him twice. The hombre yuh tried tuh frame! As long as he kin talk, I figger the head of the vigilance com—"

Brick Masson reached down into his boot and yanked out a small gun. Shag Hewes turned sidewise toward the door. Ludd, eyes desperate, making a trapped rat's play, struck for his gun. Hewes whirled, gun bared, just as a shot came from outside. Ludd coughed, reeled around to face the man in the doorway. His lower jaw sagging, Ludd tried to lift his gun again but the strength had gone from his arms. He collapsed as Shag Hewes strode to the door of Brick's prison and threw back the bar.

"Reckon we'd better do him in now," he roared. "Can't take no more chances."

From the semi-darkness Brick fired

as the door swung wide. He had not aimed at the outlaw leader and his bullet thudded into the man in the doorway. Shag cursed, flashed a glance at his fallen crony, then backed up with a gun in each fist. Brick smashed Hewes' right arm with his next shot and then spun around to crash a bullet toward the window. A gun clattered to the floor of the cabin. The head and shoulders of an outlaw fell in across the sill.

"Comin', Shag!" yelled Brick.

"Wills! Monk! Cass!" yelled Hewes.

"G-gone t-tuh Concha!" gasped the dying man on the floor near the door.

Shag Hewes tore out of the cabin and ran across the clearing to where the black horse was tethered. He ripped the rope loose as he stabbed a bullet toward the cabin door. Brick slipped out of the window as the killer horse tore out of the clearing.

At the entrance to the narrow exit from the clearing Shag Hewes turned in his saddle. His gun blazed. Brick threw himself forward and heard the bullet slice the air where his head had been. His own gun roared. But the outlaw had spurred his black mount around a bend.

Gun held ready, Brick headed his horse into that crook in the gap between the rocky walls and saw Hewes lashing at his black with his quirt. The outlaw was a good two hundred yards ahead. He twisted in the saddle and fired again. Rock chips showered Brick as the bullet sliced along the wall.

Hewes shot out of the gap. Brick's gun barked again. The outlaw urged his black over the dangerous trail that led along the edge of a deep gorge to open country. Then Brick's breath hissed inward as the black horse stumbled. Screaming, it went down to throw its rider clear of the saddle and up against a boulder. Frantically the horse struggled to recover its footing. It rolled over, snorting its terror hoofs beating at the air, long sleek neck twisting in an effort to right itself. Shag Hewes, shaking his head like an enraged bull, a stream of curses welling out of his throat, raised himself and leveled his gun just as the killer bronc pitched over the lip of the gorge.

Brick Masson fired coolly, deliberately. The forty-five slug tore through Hewes' neck and kicked him off balance. He fell on his face, his fingers clawing at the shale. As Brick dismounted, the outlaw lifted his head.

"No use, Shag," Brick said. "Looks as if the horseshoes licked yuh more ways than one. Both you an' the bronc. Those toe-calks yuh put back on him tripped him, I reckon." He kicked the gun away from Shag Hewes' grasping fingers as a group of horsemen rode into view. In single file they came over the treacherous trail. Old Dan McClintock, sitting his horse painfully, looked over and saw Brick Masson.

"Been lookin' for yuh," he yelled.

Brick asked, "Ever hear of Shag Hewes?"

"Shag Hewes—the outlaw?"

"He ain't pretty," replied Brick.

Ludd stood at the mouth of the narrow gap, a hand clutched to his side. The front of his shirt was gory. He stood there, dull-eyed, propped up against a rock. At the sound of the voices, he staggered on, one hand pawing in front of him as if he were groping in the dark. Masson ran to him and caught the man just as he was about to fall.

Ludd's lips moved as they laid him on his back. "Reckon it's the finish," he babbled. "Too—bad—I didn't—git Masson—las' night. Better git back tuh—Concha, sheriff. Hewes' gang—taggin' b-bank." That was all. Seth Ludd was dead.

"Yeah," said Brick Masson. "He was tryin' tuh tell yuh about the private game he had with Shag last night. It was some game. They were old cronies. They weren't playin' much poker. They were plannin' tuh clean the Concha Bank. An' Rabb knew I'd seen that black horse before. Yuh know how well it remembered me! Ludd took a shot at me when I was lyin' on the doc's bed. Thought I was runnin' out last night, huh, sheriff?" Brick forced a smile as his knees sagged. "Figger—I—I feel kinda whoozy, McClintock. I'll just—" Brick spread-eagled to the hard ground, mumbling something about horseshoes.

The Weston brothers had a strong code. If they wanted range, they took it. If anyone got in their way, they rode over him—or blasted him out of the path. This worked great—until Bert Little got in their way. They couldn't ride over him, or gunblast him. But a girl with a pretty face, and a strong man with a coward's heart, led him straight into the—

Clan of the Coltmen

CHAPTER I

DEATH-FEUD

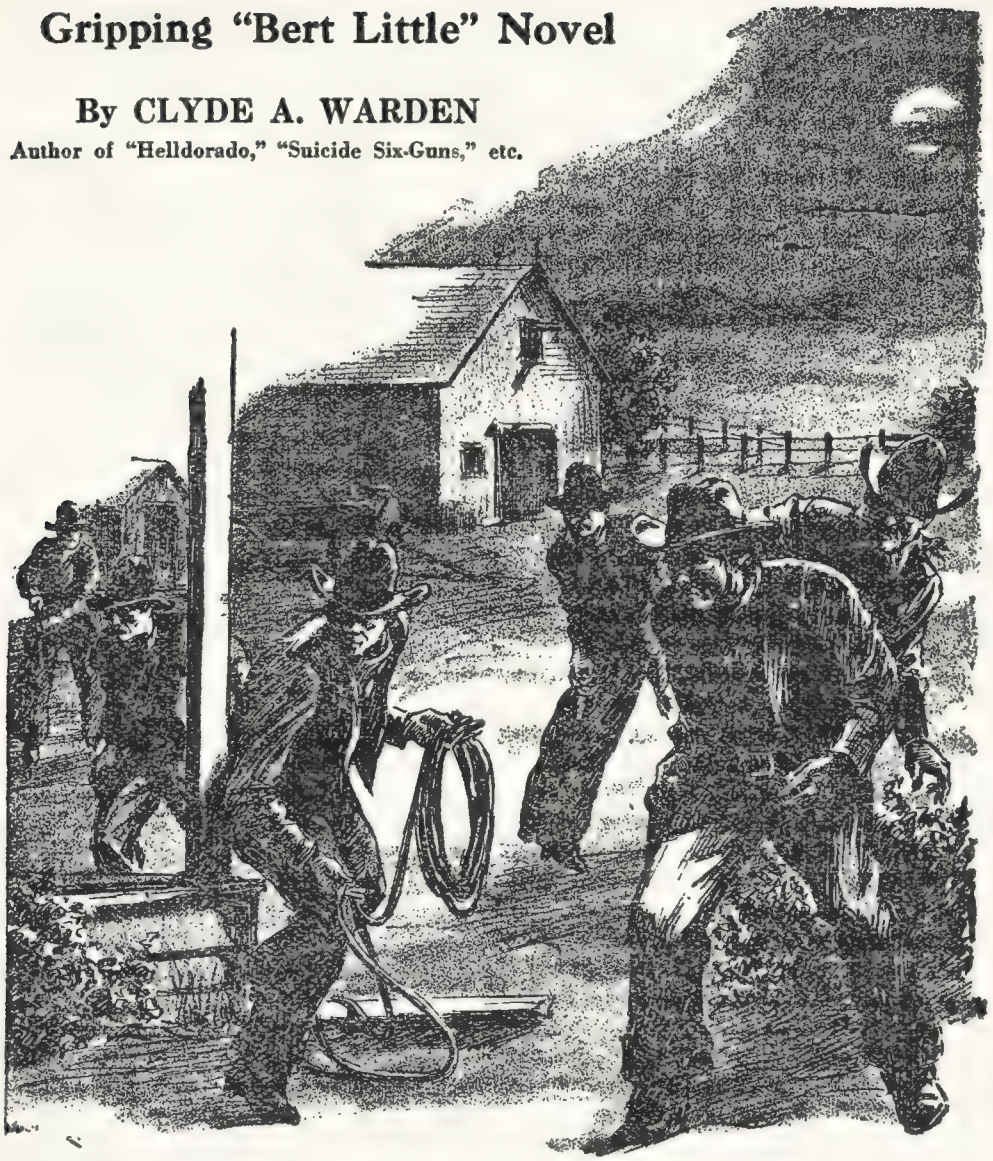
LANE MALONE jerked a glance over his shoulder and saw the three coming up on him. That glance showed him also a fourth and fifth rider. One of them was on the rim of the valley to his right. The other was on his left.

Malone looked to his mustang, easing his weight more over its shoulders. But even tophand horsemanship could not win a race that was already lost. The head of the mustang was jerking with that unmistakable sign of utter weari-

Gripping "Bert Little" Novel

By CLYDE A. WARDEN

Author of "Helldorado," "Suicide Six-Guns," etc.



The men closed in silently, swiftly

ness. His breath was coming in a whistling, sobbing effort. Flecks of foam flew back from its open mouth. Lane Malone saw that the mustang was finished. Its strength was gone. It was running now on its strength of heart, alone.

He sent a frantic glance over his shoulder again and saw that the three behind him had cut the distance almost in half. The two on the rim of the valley had kept even with him. They were the flank riders. They had no intention of passing him. Their work was merely to keep him from turning to right or left and escaping from the valley. And from their point of vantage above him they could do that easily. They could drive him straight down the valley until the three behind came up within good shooting range.

Something went wrong inside Lane Malone when he saw this. He ceased to think. He leaned low over the neck of his staggering mustang and drove in his spurs. He forgot that the poor beast was spent; forgot everything.

A bend of the valley came before him.

He thundered around it; saw the adobe hut before him. His heart leaped at the sight of that haven of safety. With a gasp of relief he sent his staggering mustang rushing on toward it.

The two riders on the rim of the valley saw the adobe hut at the same instant that Malone saw it. They leaped down from the saddle, jerking their rifles from scabbards.

A hand of ice closed over the heart of Lane Malone. The adobe hut that had seemed so close now began to dance away from him in a maddening, tantalizing manner. The mustang seemed to be only plodding.

Then he heard the sickening thud of a bullet striking through flesh. Like a hand, his mind reached out and raced over his body. No, it was not he who had been struck. He felt no pain anywhere. It was the mustang. He felt the poor beast sinking under him. He was to be cast afoot, helpless, for the bullets to cut down. If he had had a small chance before, now he had not a chance in a thousand.

A shudder began to run through him. His hands trembled. His face became white and drawn. His eyes gleamed with a wild, furtive light. The head of the mustang suddenly dipped down as another bullet struck it; this time through the brain. It fell loosely, head over heels, and lay quivering.

Lane Malone found himself on his feet, running desperately on toward the hut. His rifle trailed in his hand. How he came to be on his feet with his rifle he did not remember. His brain had frozen, had refused to function for him. Instinct alone had taken care of him. And now he ran desperately for the hut, dodging this way and that, with the bullets kicking up dust around him.

He reached the hut, diving headlong through the open doorway. And with a sighing groan of relief, he rolled aside behind the shelter of the wall.

All unknown to the fugitive and the five pursuers, another rider had witnessed the last of that race. He was a tall, bronzed, wide-shouldered fellow. He had a strong, square-cut chin, a lean and handsome face, and a pair of gray-blue eyes. He rode a big, golden-red stallion, and at his side trotted a huge, shaggy dog.

HE had been drifting along the twisting course of an arroyo when the sound of the crashing shots first reached him. He spoke softly to the stallion, checking it with a word. And he sat with his head raised, listening. The big dog paused, also, and growled softly.

For a moment the man was motionless. Then again he spoke to his mount and the stallion twisted like a cat and rushed up the slope of the arroyo, the dog a gray flash at his side.

They came to the rim of the valley in time to see Lane Malone leave the saddle as his mustang went down. The face of the tall rider went suddenly grim. The man had not a chance. It was murder that was taking place down there in the valley.

The brown hand of the rider moved in a short, swift gesture. His rifle winked brightly in the sunlight as it came from its saddle boot. But halfway to his shoulder, he checked the rifle. For he saw the fugitive gain the hut safely and dive through the open doorway.

The five rushed on. The two on the rim dipped down to the floor of the valley to join their companions. And every one of them poured a leaden hail of death in upon the cabin. The tall rider looked down at the big dog.

"Buck," he said, his voice a low, murmuring drawl, "seems like things are sort of uneven down there, don't you reckon? Five to one. Should we take a hand and cut down the odds a bit, eh?"

The ears of the big dog came up to attention. He tipped his head on the side and laughed with his red tongue lolling as he looked up at his master and listened to his low, musical voice.

The rider went on speaking, his eyes searching the valley. "Of course, it might be the law. That gent might be a criminal. And if we were to butt in, we might be making a mistake. What do you think, Buck?"

The big dog waved his tail slowly and

continued to watch his master with wise eyes.

"On the other hand, suppose it's not the law. We can't stand by and watch murder done, eh, Buck?"

The five riders in the valley below seemed suddenly to forget the man in the cabin. They reined their horses down and held them in a compact, milling group. For the moment their guns were silent. Dust rose from beneath the nervous hoofs of their racers, swirling around them. But through that dust the lone rider could see the faces of the five turned upward toward him. He saw the glint of sunlight on their rifles as the weapons turned in their hands. And then bullets whined in the air about him.

Bert Little slid from the saddle, as the stallion disappeared. He dropped behind a boulder. His rifle raised. He did not pick any of the five for a target. Instead of shooting dead center, he raised his sights and emptied his rifle in one long, drawn-out roar of shots, putting a bullet a foot or so above the head of every one of the five.

Suddenly one of the five yelled a few startled words to his companions. They did not carry to Bert Little, but the other four heard them and heeded them.

"*Dios mio!* It is that Bert Little—*el Diablo!*"

One of the gringo riders in the band lowered his rifle. "If that's Little up there, he can pick us off easy. Let's fog outta here before his shootin' gets serious. The boss will sure—"

His words were lost in the drumming of hoofbeats, as the five whirled their mounts. But disaster rode with them. In their haste two of them sent their horses plunging together. One of the racers floundered and went down, flinging its rider headlong. The horse rose again, ran a few frightened strides, and then stopped, reins trailing the ground. But the man did not rise. He fell in a crumpled heap and lay without stirring. His companions gave him one glance and rushed on without pausing.

Minutes later Bert Little rode down and dismounted beside the man. The man was a Mexican, with a crime-stamped face. He lay with his head twisted grotesquely to the side. The fall had broken his neck.

BERT LITTLE stood up and ran his glance over the valley. He saw the man step out from the adobe hut and come down toward him. He was a big fellow, with a good pair of shoulders and a brown, clear-cut face. He still carried his rifle. It was tucked in the crook of his arm in a manner that made it seem he knew its use. All these things about the man Little noted with a glance. And yet he could not forget the fact that the man had not once made an attempt to use his guns.

"Howdy, pardner," he said as the man came up.

"Howdy," Lane Malone answered.

Little saw with a sideward, searching glance that a pallor still held beneath the brown of the man's face. At this he frowned faintly in wonder. "They almost had you for a minute, there," he said.

"Yeah, they would've had me if you hadn't happened along, stranger," said Malone.

"Bert Little's the name."

"I'm glad to meet up with you, Little. I dunno how you did it, but you sure put the fear of the devil in them."

Little noted with growing wonder that the man failed to introduce himself. He pointed toward the rider with the broken neck. "You know this gent here? This Mex?"

Malone gave the dead gunman a glance and shook his head slowly. "Never saw him before."

The eyes of Bert Little searched his face for an instant. "Strange," he murmured.

"Yeah, ain't it?" agreed Malone. "I don't understand it. I'm a stranger here."

"Maybe this section of the border doesn't take kindly to strangers," suggested Little.

"Maybe not," said Malone. "Well," he added, shrugging, "I've gotta be driftin' on. They shot my horse, so I'll just bor-

row the Mex's gelding. Not likely he'll be needin' it again soon."

"Sure," said Bert Little. "Why not? It's only a trade. Which way you riding, pardner? If it's toward Paxton, I might ride along with you. I'm headed that way."

The eyes of the other widened slightly, and a furtive gleam came into their depths. "Paxton? No, I don't reckon I am. I'm headed north. Sorry. Maybe I'll see you again sometime. Thanks again for your help, Little." He turned abruptly and strode to the gelding. A few swift movements lengthened the stirrups to his size. Then he stepped into the saddle, waved, and was gone down the sweep of the valley.

Bert Little stood and looked after him, his wondering frown growing deeper. Finally he shrugged and turned away. He strode across to the spot where the dead mustang lay. And almost immediately he saw the crumpled slip of paper that had fallen into the grass when the dying mustang had thrown its rider. He picked it up and read:

Lane Malone:

You're needed bad in Paxton. Your dad's in trouble. Come alone and trust nobody. Don't tell a soul who you are or where you're headed or you'll never get here. But come fast.

Rusty Cameron.

CHAPTER II

A Fighting Clan

THE sun was slanting low in the west when the four riders who had fled from Bert Little pulled up in the yard of the Flying W ranch-house. Old Sol Weston was in the long mess hall that stretched the full length of the right wing of the house, his massive form sprawled carelessly in a big chair before the fireplace, his iron-gray head gleaming as the light of the dancing blaze played over it. His four sons were there; tall, dark, as wild as hawks, as lean of body as winter-seasoned wolves. Besides the five Westons, half a dozen punchers were in the room.

A poker game was going on in one corner of the room between four of the punchers. The Weston boys looked on, their dark eyes gleaming as they listened to the four players wrangling. Old Sol Weston sat in silence, staring into the fire, the undying brightness of his black eyes matching that of the blaze in the fireplace. It was an ordinary scene in the Flying W ranch-house.

And it was in upon this scene that the four riders burst. Three of them were gringo range drifters; the forth was a Mexican. They were sweat-streaked and dusty.

Old Sol Weston turned slowly in his chair. His black eyes went from one to another of the four. "Well?" he said, his great voice rumbling through the big room. "Did you bring this Lane Malone in?"

"We didn't bring him in," said one of the riders. "We're empty handed, chief."

"Empty handed, are you?" Sol Weston thundered, rising to his great height. "You didn't even see him, eh? You let him slip through your fingers. You bunch of blockheads, what've I got workin' for me, men or fools?"

"We saw him. We just about had him tagged with a bullet when trouble happened," said the spokesman. "We went down to Dustin and waited for him to come through. We spotted him and then got out on the trail ahead of him. We had him in a perfect trap. And then the trouble came and busted our little play all to hell."

"Trouble! What kind of trouble could stop the five of you?" demanded Weston.

"The kind that Bert Little makes," said the man quietly.

"*Bert Little!*" growled old Sol Weston. "Is he in these parts?"

"Yeah, he sure is. We had Malone bottled up in a cabin. He was all ready for the pickin'. And then Bert Little drops down on us. He come outta nowhere and he come shootin'. All we could do was get outta there and let Malone go, which we did."

"There was five of you!" thundered Weston. "Five of you and one of him. And like a pack of half-baked kids, you turn and run from him!"

"Four of us," said the spokesman,

quietly. "Pedro didn't do no runnin'. He died too sudden. We left him there."

"*Santa Maria!*" cried a voice from a far corner of the room. "Pedro!"

Dave Weston was standing closest to the Mexican. Now he reached out and struck the rising arm of the Mexican. A knife clattered to the floor.

"Stop it, Leon," said Dave Weston softly. "That's actin' like a fool."

"But, *señor*, Pedro—my brother—they left him to die alone!"

"Go on, Lamar," said Sol Weston tersely.

"Well, it was Pedro who recognized Little," the man continued. "He sang out his name. And I'm admittin' that his name meant something to all of us. Little was partin' our hair with every bullet. So we started to pile out. The trouble was, we piled too fast. Pedro's horse and Joe's came together. It threw Pedro. He broke his neck."

A rumbling grunt of scorn came from deep in Sol Weston's throat. He turned and dropped his huge bulk again into his chair. For a moment he was silent. Then he lifted his huge head. "Tom! Dalt! Lem! Dave!"

The four Weston boys strode across the room and ranged before him. He looked them over slowly, letting his black eyes dwell for an instant upon each one.

"You've all heard tell of Bert Little," he said slowly. "You afraid of him?"

THE four Westons looked solemnly at each other. No expression crossed their lean faces. But a strange, glowing fire rose from the depths of their dark eyes.

Dalt, the eldest and the biggest of the four, turned and picked up the poker that leaned beside the fireplace. It was a good-sized bar, heavy to the hands of a woman. But in the hands of big Dalt Weston it slowly bent into a curve. And not a muscle of his face twitched with the effect he exerted. He threw the twisted poker to the floor. A cold smile bared his white, strong teeth.

"Show me Bert Little," he said. "I'll twist his spine like that!"

"I'll show you to him," said the leader of the clan. "The four of you ride into Paxton. Little will come. He always comes to the center of the trouble. Wait for him. Lane Malone will come, too. Well, you boys know what to do."

"Yeah, we know what to do," said Lem Weston gently, smiling slowly. "We'll do it!"

"All right. Get started, then."

Out into the room at this moment stopped a girl. She wore boy's overalls and a boy's shirt and boots. But her clothes could not hide the slender grace of her body. Her hair was a burnt auburn, with waves of light forever playing through it. Her eyes were a smoky gray. One glance would have told that she was a Weston. And yet she differed from the rest as day does from the night.

She went straight up before old Sol Weston and stopped, her fists planted on her hips. "It's murder now, is it?" she said, a bright glint of light rising in the smoky gray of her eyes. "It's come to lowdown, common murder, eh?"

"You were listenin' in on us, eh, Billy?" the rumbling voice of Sol Weston asked.

"Sure I was. Over there at the door. I heard it all. What of it?"

"Look," said Sol Weston, somehow holding his patience. "The Malones are rustlers. Look at how many of our yearlin's we've found followin' a Flyin' W cow but wearin' a Rafter M brand. Look at the way they've tried to keep us outta this country, when we've got as much right here as any man. There was the time Tom was shot from ambush. That was Malone work. And it wasn't their fault he lived. Those damned Malones have made trouble for us ever since we landed in these parts. Now I'm gunna handle the game the way they do—"

"They were here first," said the girl. "They had the first right. Are you going to murder them because they want to hold what is theirs?"

"Billy, you're no Weston when you talk like that!" thundered the old man. "You take after your mother. And this is trouble for men. I'm gunna have that

south range. And I'm gunna have Horseshoe Valley. I've set my mind on it and I'll never back down. I'll smash any man that tries to stop me, just like I'm smashin' Sam Malone!" He swung his burning gaze upon his sons. "Well, what you waitin' for? You had my orders. Get about them!"

The four turned and stalked from the room like so many tigers. The girl watched them leave. Then she turned on her heel and left the room. But she did not stop in her room. She had made up her mind as she talked with her father to carry out a bold plan. And now she went swiftly about it. She raised her window and stepped out into the growing dusk.

One swift glance she cast around her. Then she quickly crossed the rear yard. She caught up the hackamore and bridle that hung from the topmost bar of the corral and slipped through the bars.

A hundred yards or so from the house she paused and whistled softly. A horse's shrill neigh answered her. And out of the lowering night came a swift drumming of hoofbeats. A sleek, black racer flashed up to her and slid to a halt, nudging her with a velvety nose.

She put on the hackamore and bridle, patting the shining neck of the gelding and murmuring into its attentive ear. "We're going to town, Night. We're going to beat the boys into town." She slipped upon the bare back of the black gelding, rode across to the rear gate and passed through it. And then, with her auburn hair blowing free in the wind, she headed down through the brush country toward Paxton.

CHAPTER III

The Fighting Coward

OLD memories rushed over him as Lane Malone rode down the dusty street of Paxton. Seven long years had passed since that day when he had turned his back on the town and had ridden over the distant horizon. And seven years can change many things. They had changed Lane Malone from a boy into a man. They had not, however, changed Paxton. It lay sleeping in the sun exactly as he remembered it.

Still, it quickened something inside him as he watched the old familiar sights pass by on either side, the sun-faded fronts of the stores, the saloons, the livery stable, the hotel that once had been the pride of Paxton. It made him look back and wonder why he had ever left the town of his birth.

Suddenly his glance fell upon a rider who was just turning in to the hitching rail of Gunnerson's saloon. It was the dun-colored mustang with the Rafter M brand that first caught his eye; and then it was something vaguely familiar about the rider. It came to him in a sudden flash. Rusty Cameron, the Rafter M foreman.

He kneed his mount in beside the dun and stepped down from the saddle. Rusty Cameron was looping the reins of the dun over the rail. Lane Malone stood to the side and watched him. Seven years had changed Cameron. He would be forty now. The hair at his temples was graying. He was leaner, more seasoned. The crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes were deeper, more pronounced. But he was still the old, easily smiling Rusty, as brown and as lean as an Indian.

Cameron straightened at that moment. He took off his battered sombrero and beat the dust from his clothing. Then he stooped to go under the hitching rail. He saw Lane Malone watching him at that moment, and paused. He straightened and stood staring at Malone in a half-puzzled, searching way.

Malone smiled. "Howdy, Rusty," he said.

The long hand of Rusty Cameron came up and stroked his square chin slowly. His pale blue eyes squinted to slits of gleaming ice. "It ain't!" he said softly. "It can't be!" Then a hint of a smile began to stir on his lips. His eyes opened wide. "By gravy, it is! It's the kid—growed up! It's Lane, or I'm damned!"

"Yep, I ain't a ghost, Rusty," grinned Lane Malone. "It's me, all right."

"Well, doggone my eyes," said Rusty Cameron. "You're here. You got my note."

"Yep. Yep, I got it. How's dad been, Rusty?"

The smile left the lips of Cameron. "Sam's had his share of trouble lately," he said. "Weston trouble, is what it is."

"Weston?"

"Yes. They're a new outfit in these parts. Came in after you left. Run the Flyin' W spread. And they're a plenty tough bunch of trouble-hunters. They're tryin' to hog this whole range. And they're mighty nigh doin' it. Your dad ain't got half the holdin's he used to have. They're strippin' him clean. That's why I sent for you. Sam's gettin' old. The Rafter M needs a younger Malone around to sorta run things. Things have got too fast for Sam. He's admittin' it. He wants you. And lemme tell you, son, he needs you."

"The Flyin' W?" Lane Malone repeated, his voice suddenly growing a little hoarse. "Is that the brand of the Westons, did you say?"

"Have you heard tell of them, son?" His eyes followed Lane Malone's stare. And then he saw the Flying W brand that the black gelding was wearing. He looked to Malone and his heart turned cold as he saw the pallor that was creeping beneath the tan of the youth's face. "How come you're ridin' a Weston horse, son?" he asked slowly.

The youth was still staring at the gelding, as if in fascination. "So they were the Westons," he murmured hoarsely.

"What's that, Lane? What about the Westons?"

The youth started, as if it were an effort to bring his mind back to the present. "I met them out on the trail," he said. "Five of them. They tried to ambush me. I made a run for it. But they had better horses and walked up on me. They shot my mustang out from under me. I made it to a cabin. Then a stranger happened along and took my side of the argument. There wasn't much to it. They seemed to know him. They ran like the devil himself was on their trail. He called himself Bert Little."

"Bert Little," murmured Cameron softly. "Son, don't you know that name? Ain't you heard it a thousand times? Where is Little?"

"I dunno," said Malone. "I left him there. He offered to ride with me into town. But I recollected what you said about ridin' alone, so I told him I wasn't headed for Paxton and rode in by another trail."

Rusty Cameron cuffed his hat to the back of his head. He swore softly. "Son," he finally said, "if you'd brought that gent in with you, all our troubles would've been over. We'd have had the Westons beat right now. Come along inside. I need a drink. I need a dozen drinks! I wanta forget what we've lost!"

THEY went in out of the dusk, Rusty Cameron still shaking his head. Lane Malone glanced over his shoulder with a growing uneasiness at the black gelding he had ridden into Paxton.

They stepped into the barroom, into the lights and the smoke and the noise. Rusty Cameron shouldered his way to the bar. Malone strode beside him. But his whirling thoughts kept going back to that valley where the Westons had tried to murder him. They had tried once. Therefore, they would try again.

A cold shudder went through him. He felt again that old empty helplessness rising within him. He tried to fight against it. He tried to quell the numbing force of it before it mastered him; before Rusty noticed it. He raised his glass with a trembling hand, drained it, and filled the glass again. The fire of it ran through his blood. A singing music began in his brain. He filled the glass for a third time, and his hand was steadier.

"How's the boys? How's Sleepy and Chuck and the rest?" he asked, striving for something to take his mind from the Westons.

"Sleepy and Dally and Dan Tucker are still with us," said Cameron. "You remember them. The rest came on after you left. But Chuck—he's dead. The Westons got him."

At the mention of the Westons, all the good that the liquor had done young Lane Malone was wiped out at a stroke. Once more that sick emptiness rose up

inside him. "The Westons," he said, his voice jerky, almost harsh as he tried to hold it steady, "they're pretty bad hombres, are they?"

"They're worse'n bad. There're hell!"

In the rear of the barroom, at a table in a shadowy corner, sat a man who watched them. He sat there alone, as he had sat for the last hour, waiting. His lean, sunbrowned face was impassive. A smile played on his lips, a faint, twisting half-smile. His eyes were shaded beneath the brim of his hat; but in the shadows they were alive, roving, gleaming like frosted ice. No one noticed him. He was one of the shadows. He watched young Lane Malone and understood.

Half an hour passed. Darkness gathered outside. And then a clatter of hoofbeats came with a rush down the street. They stopped in front of Gunnerson's saloon. Silence held out there for a moment. Then swift footfalls came across the walk toward the door.

The silent watcher in the corner leaned tensely forward. His gray-blue eyes gleamed with a brighter, more piercing light. And he saw the tall form of young Lane Malone grow slowly rigid, as if he had been waiting for those footfalls.

The swing doors were thrust open suddenly, and into the light of the barroom stepped four men. They were tall, broad-shouldered riders. Their hat brims were pulled low, shading the upper half of their faces like masks. They paused just inside the doorway, their dark eyes flashing in swift glances that searched the barroom and centered, finally, upon Rusty Cameron and young Malone.

The leader of the four stepped straight out toward the pair, his three companions at his elbows. With swift, light strides they crossed the barroom and stopped beside Malone. None of them spoke for a moment. Their dark eyes roved over the two.

"Cameron," said Dalt Weston finally, his voice low, yet carrying easily over the room, "who's this gent you got with you? It doesn't happen to be young Malone, does it?"

Lane Malone was frozen in his tracks. He could not move, even to turn and face the Westons. Rusty Cameron was also pale. But he turned and met the eyes of Dalt Weston.

"And if it does, what the hell's that to you, Dalt?" he asked quietly.

"It's liable to be a whole lot," said Weston. "You — Malone! Turn around here and lemme look at you."

LANE MALONE did not turn. He could not. The thing that he had been dreading had happened. His nerves had exploded again. He was frozen; could neither move nor think. He merely stood and stared in a stricken way at the glass of liquor he held in his hand. That glass was trembling, the liquor spilling over his fingers. His face was drained of color. His eyes had a wild, vacant stare. His lips were a white streak, drawn tight over his hard-locked teeth.

Rusty Cameron jerked his eyes suddenly to the face of the youth. Disbelief rose up within him first; then it changed to a sickness, to a pity that one feels for the weak. Rusty Cameron dropped his eyes to shut out that revelation.

The dark eyes of Dalt Weston had seen all this, and his lips curled. He reached out his hand suddenly and took hold of the arm of Lane Malone; turned him as a man might turn a child. "You're Lane Malone, eh? You're this fightin' fool that they sent for, are you? You're here to clean up the Westons, mebbe?"

A gasp went over the barroom when young Lane Malone took this. There was a sick, frozen expression upon his face. Rusty Cameron chewed his lip as he watched.

"Get this, Malone," Dalt Weston went on, his low, murmuring voice somehow reaching the farthest corner of the room and filling the air with a charged tension, "Paxton don't need you. The Westons don't want you. You get outta town and outta the country. You understand? Don't let the sun come up on you in these parts!"

Still Lane Malone could not raise his eyes and face Dalt Weston. Men in the room winked at each other.

"There's one thing I wanta ask you

first," Weston added. "Did you ride that black gelding out front into town?"

"Could I ask why you're interested in that, amigo?" asked a slow, drawling voice at Dalt Weston's elbow.

The dark eyes of the four Westons turned suddenly from Malone and fell upon the man who had come silently to the bar from the shadowy corner where he had watched the whole affair. They saw beside them a man as tall as the tallest of them; a wide-shouldered, lean-hipped man who wore a twisting half-smile upon his lips.

CHAPTER IV

Man Sized

DALT WESTON looked him over slowly. He could see at a glance that here was a man well worthy of attention, and his dark eyes lighted with hope. "Yeah, sure you could ask," he said. "Mebbe I'd tell you. And mebbe I'd tell you to go to hell. Who might you be, mister?"

"Why, a stranger to you, I reckon. My name's Bert Little."

"Oh, it is, eh?" murmured Dalt Weston, his black eyes lighting.

His three brothers suddenly stepped up beside him. Dave Weston wore a set expression. But the burning flame in his eyes belied his look of unconcern. Tom and Lem were crouched with an animal-like eagerness for trouble. Their hands were brushing their gun butts, their fingers twitching.

Dalt Weston brushed them back with a gesture. "This is mine, boys. You stand and watch it. I'll show you something." He turned again to Bert Little. "So you're Little, eh? And you wanta know why I'm askin' about the black gelding. Supposin' I tell you I own it, then what?"

"Why, then," said Bert Little softly, "after what I watched the rider of that gelding and some of his pardners trying to do today, I'd say you and your outfit ought to be run out of the country on a pole."

For a moment, Dalt Weston was held speechless. Then, with the swiftness of light, he hurled himself forward, his fist lashing out for the chin of Bert Little.

Every man in the room knew what that fist of Dalt Weston could do. All of them would have sworn that no man lived who could move with such blinding speed of hand and foot. They saw Bert Little step in toward Weston. The left hand of Little blurred upward in a short movement and knocked aside the blow of Dalt Weston. They saw him duck beneath the still upraised arm of big Dalt Weston. They saw his right arm cross Weston's chest. And then they gasped.

It was more of a trick then it was a feat of strength, but to those who saw it it seemed nothing short of a miracle. He caught Weston's weight across his hip and leaned swiftly forward. The two hundred pounds of Dalt Weston went sailing over his head into the faces of the three other brothers.

Two of them were hurled to the floor with Dalt. The fourth and only one to hold his balance was big Tom Weston. And next to Dalt, Tom Weston was the fighting pride of the clan. He stepped straight in at Little with a ringing shout. The smashing fist of Bert Little met him and dropped him to his knees, stunned and bewildered.

There was a moment of shocked, breathless silence. But only a moment. Dalt Weston sprang up to his feet. Dave and Lem rose with him, but he brushed them back with a wave of his arm. "Keep back! I'm gunna handle this."

"I'm gunna make it a clean slate, then!" shouted Lem. "Malone's mine!"

A bounding stride took him to the bar where young Lane Malone still stood frozen. He swung his balled fist as he leaped in. It landed flush on the chin of Malone, snapping his head back, hurling him backward, staggering. His shoulders struck the bar and held him from falling. He hung there off balance for a moment, a thin trickle of blood running down from his split lips.

Rusty Cameron was the first to see the change come over Lane Malone, and his heart leaped. The change came first in the eyes of the youth. The fixed, stricken stare went out of them. Color came back

into his face. It became a mask of brown stone. Then he smiled. It was this that brought every man in the room leaning forward. It was like the calm smile of a man who had fought through a mighty struggle and won, and no longer has anything to fear.

But Lem Weston saw nothing. He rushed straight in for the finishing blow. Young Lane Malone stood erect suddenly. He stretched himself to his toes, as a cat will stretch. And then he threw himself in to meet Lem Weston. Three times the lashing fist of Weston found his face. He walked straight through them. And over the room, chilling every man who heard it, floated his laugh.

His left hand found the throat of Lem Weston. Weston gasped and tore at the hand with clawing fingers. He might as well have tried to break a circling band of steel. He tried to tear loose and duck away from it. But he was held powerless in the left hand of the youth. Then the rockhard fist of Malone struck him. A blaze of lights exploded in his brain. Darkness swept over him.

MALONE dropped his limp form to the floor and stepped over him. And Dave Weston, rushing in at him from the side, paused suddenly. Dave Weston feared no one. But this Lane Malone whose murmuring laugh floated on the air, whose eyes blazed with a wild, pale light, looked for all the world like a madman. He checked himself in midstride and leaped swiftly to the right, his hand flashing his Colt from its holster.

Lane Malone was upon him like a panther. One hand knocked aside the gun of Weston. The other, balled into a fist, flashed upward in a looping drive that crashed flush upon Weston's chin. The smacking thud of that blow was heard in every corner of the room. Dave Weston settled back on his heels, his eyes glazed, staring. Then he wilted. And big Lane Malone whirled to find a third opponent to work on with his hands.

Bert Little stood in the center of the floor, rolling a cigarette with steady hands. At his feet lay the inert forms of Dalt and Tom Weston. Little smiled slowly at young Malone. "A sort of housecleaning, eh, my friend?"

Lane Malone stood as if in a daze, his big shoulders swaying from side to side, his hands raised in a fighting posture. And in the dead silence that had fallen over the barroom his murmuring laugh still sounded.

Rusty Cameron rushed up to him and grasped his hand. "Old son," his words tumbled one on another in his excitement, "you're a real Malone! You've done yourself proud! You had me worried there for a minute. But now I understand it. You're the kind of a gent that ain't bothered by words. You're like a stick of dynamite. It takes fire to set you off. And then you're hell on wheels!"

The youth looked at Cameron in a dazed, disconnected way. Bert Little strode across to them. "Let's get out of here, *amigos*," he said. "The boys are coming around. There's no need of making gun trouble out of this. And that's what it'll be, if I know their kind. They'll figure they have their honor to uphold. Shall we drift?"

"Yeah, let's drift," said Cameron. "Come along, Lane."

They went outside. There they paused again. "You'll need another horse, Lane," said Cameron. "You can't ride this gelding of the Westons again, or they'll have you up for a horse thief. I'll go ahead down to the livery and have Damon saddle you one."

He stepped under the hitching rail, mounted his dun, and rode off down the street. Lane Malone stepped into the shadows beside the saloon and leaned his shoulder against the wall of the building. He was trembling from head to foot, as if with a chill. Bert Little stood beside him, silent, understanding.

"You know about me," said the youth at last. "You guessed it there in the valley today. I'm no good. I'm a coward. When the danger comes, I freeze up. I tell you, Little, you've wasted your time on me. I ain't worth it. Look at me now. I'm shakin' like a leaf."

"Aye, but it's yourself you're afraid of, my friend," said Little gently.

"I dunno. I dunno what it is. Rusty

thought I was a coward in there. And he was right. I was scared half to death of the Westons!"

"Not of the Westons," said Bert Little gently. "You were afraid of yourself and what you might do."

"What did I do?" the youth asked suddenly. "What happened? I can't remember."

"Nothing much," said Little, smiling faintly in the darkness. "You just took two of the Westons and bashed them up a bit. That's all."

"Yes, that's all!" said another voice suddenly. "But a good job you did of it, let me tell you! A real, man-sized job!"

It was a low, husky, musical voice. It was the voice of a girl. And now she moved out of the deeper darkness and stood beside them, laughing softly.

CHAPTER V

Trouble Maker

SHE paused in a shaft of dim light that came from a dirty windowpane of the saloon; but even in that half darkness the beauty of her shone brightly enough to make Lane Malone draw his breath in sharply. Even the boy's clothing she wore could not hide it. In fact, afterwards, Lane Malone could not have told how she was dressed. He saw only the graceful poise of her straight, slender body; the bronze of her face; the smoky gray of her eyes.

She stood with her head thrown back, the soft, husky ripple of her laughter filling the air. "It was better than good," she said. "It was perfect. And it's what they asked for — it's what they've had coming for a long time."

"You—you saw it?" Malone asked, his tongue stumbling awkwardly on the words.

"I'll say I did! I was there at the window. I saw it all."

"You — saw — everything?" repeated Malone in a dazed sort of way, remembering how he had stood frozen under the threat of Dalt Weston.

Instantly she divined what he meant and her laughter died. She stepped close to him and laid her hand gently upon his arm. "Don't worry about that," she said. "There's not a man anywhere who could face Dalt when he's like that without feeling the same way you felt—that is, no one but Bert Little, here. You are Bert Little, aren't you?" she added, turning to him.

"Aye," said he gravely. "I'm Little. But you've got me wrong, girl. Most everyone gets me wrong. I don't go out hunting trouble for the sake of it. I only see something that's got to be done, and I do it. That's all."

"Well, even so, how many of us could be a Bert Little?" she asked. "You're probably the only man who could face Dalt without freezing up inside. I know, because I know Dalt." She turned back again to Lane Malone, and her smoke-gray eyes glowed. "That's why it was so wonderful to see you break loose. You knew about the Weston brothers. And yet when they pressed you too far, you showed them a thing or two."

Color glowed suddenly under the tan of her cheeks as she looked at him. A faint smile played on her lips.

Lane Malone met her eyes; and wild fire seemed suddenly to rush through him. "I'm Lane Malone," he said. "I reckon we oughta introduce ourselves."

"I already knew that. "I came into town to find you — to warn you about what was going to happen. But I was too late."

"You mean about the Westons?" asked Malone in surprise. "How could you know about that—about the trouble between the Malones and the Westons, I mean?"

"Why, being a Weston, of course," she said, smiling. "I'm Billy Weston. Lee is my real name. But dad wanted another boy when I was born. So he called me Billy to try and forget that I was a girl."

"You're a Weston!" said Lane Malone slowly.

"Well, what's so strange about that?"

"And you came in to warn me about your brothers?"

Her mood changed again, swiftly. She became solemn. "Just because our fathers

are fighting is no reason why we have to be enemies, is it?"

"Well, no, I reckon not," said Malone. "I'm just surprised, is all. I didn't expect to find anybody like you among the Westons."

"Are you sorry?" she asked, smiling again.

"Sorry? Well, I reckon not!"

"Then don't frown so. You almost frighten me."

Through all this Bert Little was silent, watching the two of them, and smiling to himself. It was easy enough to see that they had forgotten his presence. And it was plain to Little that he was no longer needed. He stepped back to the walk.

"I reckon I'll go on down to the stable," he said. "I left the stallion there. I'll get it and come back with your pardner, Malone."

They neither saw him nor heard him. They merely stood looking at each other, and smiling a little. The faint smile of Bert Little broadened slightly. He turned and went softly down the street.

RUSTY CAMERON was just leading the horses out of the stable when he reached it. Cameron looked up in surprise when he came in alone. "Hello!" he said. "Where's Lane, Bert? You lose him?"

"Aye, I lost him," said Little, his smile coming again. "I reckon we've all lost him. I left him talking with a girl up the street."

"A girl!" Cameron grunted, frowning in sudden alarm. "What girl in Paxton could the boy know? He's been gone for years."

"This time the way was sort of paved for him," said Little. "The girl is Billy Weston."

"Billy Weston!" gasped Cameron. "Good gravy, Little, you don't mean that!"

"Aye, that's who it was. And she's a right good-looking girl."

"Yeah, sure she is! She's poisoned honey. They sent her in to get Lane if the Weston brothers failed. And she'll get him. There ain't a man that could think straight after lookin' at that pretty face of hers! Little, we gotta get back there and get Lane away from her!"

"I think you're wrong," said Little. "But we'll go back. Wait'll I get the stallion and Buck. I'll be right with you."

He went in and saddled the golden-red stallion, mounted and rode out to Comeron. The Rafter M foreman was pacing up and down. And when Little appeared, he threw himself into the saddle and led the way down the street.

They came again to Gunnerson's saloon. Little dismounted and strode across the sidewalk. He stepped into the shadows where he had left Malone and Billy Weston. And he found that spot empty.

He stood frowning for a moment, staring at the empty darkness. Then he turned sharply and stepped back to the street. Even before he looked, he knew what he would find. So he was not surprised to see the gelding Malone had ridden, and the horse of the girl's gone. He turned to Cameron and found the Rafter M foreman watching him with a grim-set face.

"They're gone," said Little.

"Yeah, I knew it," growled Cameron. "It's another Weston trick. The minute you said who the girl was, I knew trouble was in the air. Little, we gotta get Lane back. They'll murder him!"

"I still think you're wrong about the girl," said Little. "But we'll play the game safe. I'll follow them. You ride to your ranch and tell them what's up."

"I'll do it!" barked Cameron. "I'll get every man on the Rafter M and clean the Flyin' W out. We'll end this thing—"

"Hold on," said Little gently. "Don't go jumping to conclusions too fast, old son. We don't know yet if anything's wrong. Just hold them there until you hear from me."

"And suppose you don't come back? That Weston outfit ain't above murder, remember. You're liable as not to run square into a slug of lead."

"Wait until morning," said Bert Little. "If we're not back then, do what you want."

IN the saloon, meanwhile, the Weston brothers had regained their senses. Dave was the first to come to. Lem was just stirring. Dave went to him and helped him to his feet. Then Dalt rose, surging to his feet and shaking his head as a great steer might after a bad fall. Tom was the last to rise. And all that time there was not a sound to break the silence that had fallen over the barroom. Men could only stand and stare, stunned at the thought that two men had been able to do this to the four Westons.

The four strode to the bar, glancing neither to right nor left. And the bartender, after one glance at their dark, grim-set faces, hurried to serve them. Dalt waved his hand. And to the bartender that was order enough. He set out a bottle of his best stock and four glasses. Dalt poured the drinks in silence.

They were having their second round when Joe Hemel came in through the front door and strode straight up to Dalt Weston. Hemel was a big, rawboned fellow with a red face. He leaned on the bar at Dalt's elbow and spoke in a low whisper.

"I just seen this gent you had the trouble with—this Malone gent," he said.

Dalt Weston neither looked up nor answered him. His dark, handsome face changed not a whit. But the glass of liquor suddenly collapsed in his fingers, spilling whiskey and broken splinters of glass over the bar.

"I seen him outside talkin' with your sister," said Hemel.

Dalt Weston turned his head slowly. His dark eyes bored into Hemel's. The muscles rippled along his jaw. "That's a lie, Hemel," he said softly.

"I seen the two of them ride off together, like old friends would," added Hemel.

"That's a damn lie," whispered Dalt Weston. He turned as he spoke. His right fist lashed up in a short, hooking uppercut, and landed solidly home upon the jaw of Hemel. The force of it hurled Hemel backward. He landed on the flat of his shoulders and slid half a dozen feet before he stopped.

Dalt Weston did not stir from the bar. But a gun winked suddenly into his hand. The muzzle of it shifted and followed Hemel until he stopped sliding and sat up.

"Say it's a lie, Hemel," said Dalt Weston softly, "or stand up and pull your gun."

The big hand of Joe Hemel caressed his jaw. His eyes glittered brightly. But he merely smiled. "It's not a lie," he said. "And I won't stand up and fight you, Weston. I was aimin' to do you a favor. Step out to the side of the saloon beside the window. If you ain't a complete blind fool, you'll read enough sign to tell you the truth of it. And just keep this in mind, my friend—I ain't forgettin' this. There'll come a day when you'll sweat blood for it."

Dalt Weston turned and spoke a few whispered words to his brothers, and all four of them stalked silently from the barroom.

Joe Hemel rose and stepped to the bar. And again no word was spoken by the crowd. They remembered that this was Joe Hemel; and Joe Hemel was a man to treat with almost as much respect as the Westons.

He poured himself a drink from the bottle the Westons had left standing on the bar, tasted it, and tossed it off. Outside a sudden rush of hoofbeats broke the silence of the night. He heard them fade into the distance, smiled, and poured himself a second drink.

"That'll be on the Westons," he said to the bartender as he slid back the empty glass. "And that's just the first of what he's gunna pay me for this night's work." He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, turned, and strode out into the night. And not until then did the crowd relax. A deep sigh passed over the room. This night was one that Paxton would not soon forget.

Straight down the street Joe Hemel strode. He came to an alley and vanished into the shadows that filled it. He paused there until he made sure no one was following him. Then he went on. And a few minutes later he came to the shack on the edge of town.

THERE was no light showing through the windows, but Joe Hemel knew that the windows were blanketed for this very reason. He knew, also, that men waited inside for his return. He stepped to the door, rapped loudly three times, paused, and rapped three times again, softly. And almost instantly the door was opened to him.

Darkness choked the interior of the shack when the door opened, but he could smell the acrid odor of smoke from the lamp that had just been blown out. He stepped into the shack and the door was closed behind him.

"Joe?" said a low voice from the darkness.

"Yeah, it's me, chief," said Joe Hemel, shivering, as he always did, at the sound of that rasping voice.

"Light the lamp again, Lefty," that same voice ordered.

A match flared. Lefty touched it to the lamp's wick and straightened the chimney. The flame rose into the throat of it, steadied and brightened, falling across the twisted, misshapen form of the man in the chair beside the table. Joe Hemel gathered his courage and met the cold, piercing gaze of the cripple. He forced himself to look calmly upon the scarred face; the shrunken, outthrust jaw; the hooked beak of a nose; the piercing eyes. And inside he turned cold as he always did when he looked upon his chieftain; for he knew him as a man long thought dead—who once had been called Smiler Loomis, the killer.

"Well?" asked Smiler.

"The Westons cornered Malone in Gunnerson's saloon," said Hemel. "Then Malone busted loose like a wild man and cleaned Lem and Dave. Bert Little was there. He took care of Dalt and Tom. And he did a plenty slick job of it, lemme tell you."

"He handled Dalt?" said Smiler. "I didn't think one man could do it."

"He made Dalt look like a fool kid," said Hemel. "The two camps are ready for war. There's gunna be blood spilled over tonight's work. But I got better news than that, chief. Young Malone met Billy Weston after the fight was over. And the two of them made up like a duck does to water. They rode off together. I told Dalt about this and set him on Malone's trail. There'll be a killin' tonight, I reckon."

A gleam of satisfaction rose in the eyes of Smiler. "Good work, Joe. You're a good boy and I'll remember you. Now there's work to do. I ain't gunna trust the Westons to do a good job. I'm gunna do it myself and let them take the credit. Get out the horses, you boys. Joe, carry me out and put me in the saddle. We're ridin'. We're takin' Malone and the girl before the Westons do. It's a perfect setup. The Westons will blame the Malones for stealin' the girl; and the Malones will go gunnin' the Westons for what happens to the Malone kid. It's perfect. I couldn't want it better.

"For thirty years I've waited!" he rasped. "Thirty years of hell, waitin', hopin', plannin'. Sam Malone and Sol Weston. Friends, were they — pardners in the old days when they rode for me. All hell couldn't pull them apart. But I've done it. Me, Smiler Loomis, a gent men figger dead — finished by the hands of Weston and Malone! I've made them hate each other. I've set the stage a little at a time. Now I'm ready. Now I'm gunna collect for that day their bullets left me a life of livin' hell!"

CHAPTER VI

TANGLED TRAILS

MANY were the riders that moved swiftly out of Paxton that night, rushing through the darkness on the trail that Lane Malone and Billy Weston had taken out of town. First and swiftest of them was Bert Little, for he had Buck, the dog, to search out and point the way for him.

Two miles out of Paxton he overtook them; but instead of riding straight up to the two, he circled around and came back to the trail ahead of them. And when Malone and the girl rode by, he was standing in the foliage at the side of the trail, lost in the deeper shadows.

He listened to the low murmur of their voices as they passed, and to the lifting

of their ready laughter. And he smiled slowly to himself. "Buck," he said quietly, after they had passed from hearing down the trail, "it looks like you and me would be butting in where we weren't wanted, if we tried to step in there and part those two. Maybe I'm wrong, but I think that girl's on the square. We'll just follow along and sort of keep an eye open, eh?"

So the two rode on, undisturbed. And Bert Little rode behind them, out of hearing distance. That was the way they passed through the dark, silent hills. They rounded the brow of a hill, finally, and saw the lights of the Flying W ranch-house twinkling below them. Lane Malone suddenly pulled up.

"I reckon this is far enough, Billy," he said. "Down there ain't exactly the safest place for me."

She pulled up beside him and her gay laughter went rippling off into the darkness. "You're always pretending. But you can't fool me, Lane Malone. I know what you'd do if you were sure there was danger down there. You'd get right into the heart of it. But you know the boys are all in town. Only dad's down there. You're afraid it'll be too quiet for you. You're afraid you'll be bored."

Lane Malone did not answer her. He could not. The very thought of approaching closer to the Weston house had brought that smothered emptiness up inside him again. He locked his teeth together and stared in silence down at the ranch-house.

"But you'll have to see dad, anyway," the girl went on. "He'll be glad to meet the man who handled two of his famous sons the way you did. He'll want to know how it was done."

She led the way. And Lane Malone could do nothing but follow her. The thought of what lay ahead made him faint and dizzy with a sick emptiness. He was no longer thinking for himself. The girl was leading him straight into trouble; and he could do nothing but follow. To refuse to go on would mean nothing to her. She could not understand. She had misunderstood him entirely and she refused to see anything new about him.

In the yard he halted again, and sat staring in a stricken way at the lighted squares of the windows. Billy Weston slipped down from the saddle and stepped back beside him. "Come along, Lane," she said. "I promise not to keep you long—"

Suddenly, men rose up from the black wall of shadows that lined the side of the veranda. Starlight glinted upon the steel of their guns.

"Hold it! You — Malone — don't try nothin'! We'll drop the girl as quick as we do you. Remember that!"

Rough hands caught both of them. Two men pinned Malone's arms to his sides. His gun was jerked from its holster. He felt the hard, round muzzle of a Colt laid against his spine. Another of them had caught the girl in a rough-handed grip. But Billy Weston had not submitted quietly and hopelessly, as Malone had. The silken, spring-steel muscles of her slender body became suddenly alive. She surged this way and that, wrenching to tear loose her arms.

"Fight, Lane!" she gasped. "Dad and our men can hear us!"

Her captor crushed her to him, clapping a big hand over her mouth before she could cry out. He spoke in her ear:

"One more play like that one and the boys'll let Malone have it, sister. Take a look. See that gun in his back? All right, stow it before they split his wishbone for him!"

THE girl froze into immobility. Her smoke-gray eyes, flecked with points of white flame, fastened upon the gun that was held against Malone's back. It was that, and not the danger to herself, that took the thought of resistance out of her.

And in silence the gunmen led them away from the ranch-house, holding always to the blacker shadows that lined the house. They skirted the bunkhouse, circled the corral, and came to the willows that stretched back to the creek. There the horses were waiting. They were forced to mount. Ropes were

brought and they were tied securely in the saddle. And then the humped, grotesquely twisted rider who had been waiting with the horses led the way into the night.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch-house, other things were happening swiftly. Bert Little had followed close enough to see Malone and the girl outlined against the night sky on an occasional rise, or to hear the murmur of their voices now and again. But when they rode straight down to the ranch-house, he pulled up and frowned in wonder. This was not at all what he had expected. Surely Malone knew the risk he was taking in riding boldly up to the Weston ranch-house.

Then he saw them outlined against a lighted window, close to the house. He saw them dismount and go on up toward the front veranda. And in that moment he had his first doubt of the girl.

Bert Little stepped down from the saddle, dropped the reins, and motioned the big dog to stand guard over the stallion. But he stood there while the moments dragged by, frowning at the strangeness of the thing. Malone and the girl had simply disappeared into the shadows that bulked around the house.

They had not entered. Of that he was certain. No door had opened. And yet he was just as certain that they were no longer in the shadows. He could have heard them speak or move about. Whatever it was that had happened had come with the silence and speed of magic, for across only fifty yards of darkness he had seen and heard nothing.

Suddenly Little stepped out across the open, striding swiftly toward the house. He entered the shadows where trouble had fallen upon Malone and Billy Weston. And at that instant men leaped upon him. He had no warning of their presence. With the silence of shadows, they came from nowhere. Blows rained upon him. He felt the crushing weight of many bodies bearing him down. Heavy fists beat him backward. He went down. They had their guns out now, using them as clubs. One struck the side of his head. It was only a glancing blow, but it exploded a shower of sparks in his brain.

He was jerked to his feet and held powerless, two men on each arm. A thundering, commanding voice brought silence. A towering man, taller even than Bert Little, stepped forward. This man, a glance told Little, was the leader of the men.

"Light a match, one of you," the man ordered. "Lemme take a look at this gent."

A match flared and was held before Little's face. His gray-blue eyes met the dark eyes of old Sol Weston with a cold steadiness as Weston leaned closer and studied his features with a piercing stare.

"Dunno him," grunted Weston. "Never seen him before. Who are you, mister?"

Bert Little said nothing.

"Ain't talkin', eh?" said Sol Weston. "Well, mebbe you'll tell why you were sneakin' around the place after dark. This is the Flyin' W, stranger. I'm the boss, Sol Weston. And I'm askin' you what you wanted here."

But Little still did not answer.

"There's ways of makin' a gent talk," said Sol Weston, his face growing hard with anger. "You want me to use them, mebbe?"

It seemed to Little that a clean breast of things would be a mistake that would finish him. If these were the men who had spirited Malone away, and that was the only logical reasoning, then Cameron had been right about the girl. She had led Malone into a trap. And by telling his identity, he would throw away all chances to undo the work of the girl and save Malone from the Westons.

"Leon! Come here!" the voice of Weston thundered suddenly. "You know a way or two to make a man talk. Get to work on this gent."

"*Si, señor!*" grinned the Mexican. "Leon make heem talk plenty fast!"

HE drew a slim knife from his belt. The starlight caught the polished steel of its blade and made it gleam like a finger of ice in the darkness. And with

that knife poised lightly in his hand, he stepped up to Bert Little.

At that moment, a rushing beat of horses' hoofs came out of the night, sweeping closer to the ranch-house, thundering into the yard. The riders threw themselves down and strode swiftly up to the group. Bert Little knew they were the four Weston brothers, and his last hope to help Malone disappeared. Here was some one who knew him, and would name him as an enemy to the Westons.

Straight into the crowd with their catlike, stalking strides came the four brothers. They gathered behind the leader of the clan.

"What's up, dad?" asked Dalt. "What's the trouble here? Who's this?"

"That's what I'm aimin' to find out," said old Son Weston. "We heard a sound out here and laid for him. Caught him sneakin' around the house. I dunno him and he won't talk."

"Light a match," said Dalt Weston. "I've gotta hunch I've met this gent. The height of him and the shoulders—"

Another match was lighted and held before the face of Bert Little. And a deep toned growl came from the throat of Dalt Weston.

"It's Bert Little," he murmured, stepping closer. "And I'm damn glad to see you, Little. We'll settle an argument that started back there in Paxton."

Sol Weston turned and looked at his son. "What d'you mean by that," he asked. "You had trouble with Little in town? How come he got away from you? How come he's here—unmarked?"

"I dunno," said Dalt Weston. "Mebbe it was luck. Mebbe he's just a better man. But this gent here, this Bert Little, knocked both Tom and me cold and left us layin' on the floor of Gunnerson's saloon. And while he was doin' that, young Lane Malone did the same for Lem and Dave."

"You fought Lane Malone and Little—the four of you—and let them beat you?" thundered old Sol Weston.

"I'm gunna fight Little again—right here!" said Dalt Weston. "We'll see if he can repeat it!"

"What happened to Malone?" demanded Sol Weston. "Where is he now?"

"That's what I aim to beat outta Little," said Dalt. "Malone rode outta town after the trouble. And Billy rode with him!"

"Billy!" the old man thundered. "Dalt you mean my Billy—my girl?"

"That's just what I mean. I dunno how the thing come about. I dunno nothin' about it. Mebbe that damned Malone stole her. She couldn't go of her own accord. Little was with them at first. And I'm gunna beat the truth outta him!"

The lined, weather-beaten face of old Sol Weston became a terrible thing to see. In the light of the lanterns some one had brought his dark eyes gleamed with red fire. He turned slowly and looked upon Bert Little.

Little, meanwhile, had been thinking swiftly, reversing this whole thing in his mind. The Westons, after all, had not captured Malone. Where, then, was the youth? And where was the girl?

"Little," said old Sol Weston, controlling his voice only with a great effort, "I've heard some good things about you. But workin' with the Malones disproves all I've ever heard. They're a pack of yellow rats, and anybody workin' with them is no better. I'll treat you like I would a Malone. You tell me where my girl is or I'll kill you the way I'd step on a snake! You hear me, man? Then talk fast!"

"LOOK," said Bert Little quietly, "I figured you gents a bit wrong, I see. So I'll tell you why I'm here. When young Malone and your girl left town, they headed straight for this ranch. It made Rusty Cameron worry. I reckon he thought the girl was aiming to turn Malone over to you. I tried to argue him out of the idea, but he was set on it. So I agreed to follow along behind them and sort of look out for trouble.

"I trailed behind them all the way from town. They came straight here. Take a look over yonder beside the barn. I reckon you'll find the horses they were riding. I saw them dismount in the yard and come on up to the house. And that's the last

I saw of either of them. I waited a while and nothing happened. I began to wonder what was wrong. I should've either seen them open a door or heard them outside talking. But the yard seemed empty from where I was. I came up. That's when you gents jumped me. Whatever happened to the two—well, I don't know. Your guess is as good as mine."

An angry murmur of disbelief came from the Flying W riders. And that murmur seemed to make up the minds of the Westons.

"You can't hand us a line like that and make us take it, Little!" growled old Sol Weston. "If the hosses are over there, you brought them in. Malone and Billy weren't here. You've had your chance! Take him, boys! String him high!"

"Hold it—every one of you!" the ringing voice of Dalt Weston rose above the mad yelling of the crowd. "Little's my man! And if I gotta fight the lot of you to prove it, I'll do it! Understand?"

Somehow, he won silence. And then he stepped lightly up before Little. "You'll fight me, Little?" he asked. "Or are you afraid to face me again."

"Wasn't once enough, Weston?" said Bert Little gently.

"Not near enough, Little. We'll fight now until one of us is dead!"

Suddenly Bert Little smiled. "I'll fight you, Weston," he murmured gently, "on one condition. Afterwards, if I win, I'm to go free. I'll have my guns now and give you the first hold."

"It's a bargain, Little! If you beat me, you're free. Who's got Little's guns? Unload them and put them in his holsters. All right, Little, step out to me!

CHAPTER VII

DALT'S CHALLENGE

THE crowd drew back and formed a circle. More lanterns were brought and lighted, until the yard was almost as bright as day. In the center of the circle Bert Little and Dalt Weston stood and faced each other.

"All right, Weston," said Bert Little quietly. "Take your hold, and do your best, my friend."

Dalt Weston stepped in close to Little. He passed his arms under the arms of Little and locked his hands behind Little's back. Then, with his head buried between his shoulders, his chin braced against Little's chest, he began slowly and relentlessly to bear down.

A low murmur ran around the circle. Men grinned with eager delight. They knew of the strength of big Dalt Weston. They waited now to hear the spine of Bert Little snap, to see the life crushed from him.

And Bert Little, that first instant, saw how greatly he had underestimated the strength of Dalt Weston. It was as if a great steel vise had closed around him. Fire began in his lungs. It mounted in a red wave to his brain. The muscles in his stomach seemed on the verge of being pulled loose from their roots. A great numbness began to rush over him. The pain along his spine became intense, grew unbearable. And yet the strength in the arms of Dalt Weston continued, grew greater, mounting each moment like the strength of a mighty torrent.

Now Bert Little succeeded in getting his fingers beneath the chin of Weston. He threw his left arm around the shoulder and back of Dalt. And then for the first time he began to exert his own strength.

Great, rippling bands of muscle bulged across his back and shoulders. His shirt split from shoulder to waist. Tendons cracked. The breath of the two fighters whistled through their clenched teeth. A deep-seated, drawn-out groan was torn from Dalt Weston. His face reddened to a fiery color. Cords stood out in his neck. His black eyes glazed with the effort of his straining.

Yet slowly, relentlessly, the hand of Bert Little forced his chin up. His head raised. His neck bent back. His fingers slowly slipped from their hold. And the groan that had been torn from the throat of Dalt Weston was echoed around the circle.

Bert Little bent his head. The muscles across his back leaped out in great, rippling bunches. The eyes of Dalt Weston began to roll wildly in his head. His

breath came in great, whistling gasps. And then his hands were torn loose from their hold. He hung in mid-air, in the mighty grip of Bert Little, helpless.

A sudden twist of the hand would have snapped the neck of Weston, then. But the life of Weston was not what Little wanted. Instead, he dropped the big man to the ground and stepped back, his arched, muscular chest heaving as he drew in great lungfuls of new air. He stood there, waiting.

"Weston—don't carry it on," he said. "Don't make me hurt you more, man!"

Up rose Dalt Weston slowly. He gained his feet and stretched himself. Then he went in at Little with a drifting, gliding stride. He went in crouching, his great fists poised. And Bert Little met him in the middle of the circle. He sidestepped and sent his left in with a lightning stroke. It slipped through the guard of Weston and rocked his head back.

But it did not stop him. He whirled and rushed on in at Little. Then, suddenly, Bert Little stopped and waited for him. Weston was taken completely by surprise. He tried to dive aside, but the looping right of Little found his open chin. It drove him backwards and sideways. He fell on his face and lay twitching.

It was then that the mob forgot the promise of Dalt Weston. A wild yell of rage burst from them. And to a man they surged in upon Bert Little. It was hardly less than he had expected. And he was ready for it. He turned like a tiger and charged the nearest man. That man went down before a driving right. Hands caught at him as he dived through the opening, but he tore those hands loose and rushed on.

The veranda was before him. He leaped up the steps and across it. Guns flashed into hands behind him. A crashing roar of shots broke the silence. But Little was already through the doorway and those bullets ripped into the front of the house and through the door as he slammed it and leaped aside.

He rushed straight down the hallway and out the rear door, knowing that they would guess his intention and rush around from both sides to stop him. He got there ahead of them, and he sprinted straight off through the darkness, circling toward the spot where he had left the golden-red stallion and the dog waiting.

A shrill whistle brought them to him. Down through the darkness, mane flying in the wind, came King; and at his side, a gray streak that was lost in the shadows, raced Buck. Into the saddle with a running leap, Little swung. He called softly to the stallion, and King answered with a rushing burst of speed. Over the rise they swept, the three of them, the three of the wild; and the voice of the pursuit faded swiftly into the distance.

Not many minutes after this a rider came into the yard of the Flying W ranchhouse. He came in on a foam-flecked, winded horse, swung down, and hurried up to the few who had not rushed away after Little. Old Sol Weston was one of those few; and straight up to Weston the man strode.

"You're Sol Weston, ain't you?" the man demanded.

"I'm Sol Weston," the rancher admitted. "But I don't know you, stranger."

"Mebbe not," said the man. "But you know Sam Malone, mebbe."

"Yeah, I know him, the damned bushwhacker!" said Weston. "What about it?"

"Nothin' much," said the man. "Only Malone's in town, sayin' your girl led young Malone into a trap so you could murder him, and that he's gunna shoot you on sight if you got the nerve to meet him in Paxton."

"He's sayin' that, is he?" shouted Weston, wild rage bursting loose inside him. "Why, damn him! It was his kid that stole my girl! You go tell Malone I'll see him, and that I'll be packin' a bullet with his name on it!"

He turned and strode for the house, his lined, weather-beaten face set in a cold, grim, fighting mask. And not a hand was lifted to stay him. It was a fighter's code. Sol Weston had been challenged, and he must answer it.

And at exactly the same moment another agent of Smiler Loomis was at work at the Rafter M.

BIG Sam Malone was striding up and down in the front room of the house, his gray head bent, his seamed, rugged face grim set. Every puncher on the ranch was in the room, squatting on his heels, squinting through the smoke of his cigarette, waiting, silent, ready for anything.

"It ain't so much that the boy didn't wanta hurry straight home and see us," Sam Malone was muttering. "It ain't that. And it ain't that I mind him thinkin' of a girl first. But when that girl's a Weston and he lets her lead him off like a beef to the slaughter—that's more'n I can understand! What in hell could the boy have been thinkin' of? A Malone makin' up to a Weston! Rusty, I ain't gunna wait any longer. We're ridin' to the Flyin' W. And if they've done for my boy, hell will be cool to what I'll give them!"

"Hold on now, Sam," said Rusty Cameron. "You gotta be patient. Little said—"

It was at this moment that the knock came at the door. Every man stiffened. Sam Malone turned to stride across the room, but Cameron rose and stopped him.

"I'll go. You keep back outta sight. A bullet can come outta the dark, remember." He went to the door, opened it, and looked out at a hard-faced stranger.

"I wanta see Sam Malone," said the man.

"Malone ain't seein' n o b o d y," said Rusty Cameron. "What d'you want with him?"

"He'll see me," said the other tersely, "or else he's everything that Weston said."

"And what the hell did Weston say I was?" thundered Sam Malone, striding boldly to the door and thrusting it wider with his toe.

"He said you was a coward and a yeller skunk if you didn't meet him in Paxton and have it out with him man to man," said the stranger.

"He said that?"

"Yeah, he said that! He said he'd be waitin' for you in the middle of the street. And he said to come shootin'."

"You go tell him I'm comin'!" said old Sam Malone. "I've been addin' the score up for a long time. Now I'll clean the slate!"

"I'll tell him," said the stranger. "He'll be waitin' for you. He tugged the brim of his hat lower, turned, and strode down the steps, grinning into the darkness at his success.

"Sam, I'm goin' with you," said Rusty Cameron.

Sam Malone shook his head. "I'm ridin' this trail alone. This here is between Sol Weston and me." He strapped on his guns, tied down his holsters as had been his habit in days long passed.

CHAPTER VIII

Vengeance Seeker

TO a ramshackle hut, deep in the brakes of the Rio Grande, the outlaws of Smiler Loomis took Lane Malone and Billy Weston. The ride had been made in silence for the most part. Malone and the girl had been separated, one riding near the front of the line and the other at the rear. But Billy Weston turned now and again in the saddle and looked back to him. In the darkness he could not see her face, but he could see her silhouette against the lighter arc of the night sky when she turned.

They came after what seemed an infinite time to the shack of the brakes. One of the men lifted down that grotesquely deformed rider who had led the way through the night and carried him inside the shack. After a moment the light of a lantern gleamed through the paneless windows and the door of the shack.

The rest dismounted. Two men came to take Malone and the girl from their horses. For the first time since the ride started the two were together.

"Billy, you all right, girl?" Malone asked hoarsely.

"I'm all right. A little cramped from the ropes. But I'm fine."

"You afraid, Billy?"

"A little. And you, Lane?"

The question was a shock to him, for until that moment he had forgotten him-

self and had thought only of the girl. Now he looked into himself and was shocked again to find that he was strangely calm. The fact that he was in danger seemed no longer to hold any significance. He had become used to it. Even the fact that death might be only moments away seemed unimportant. Nothing seemed to matter.

The girl had been watching him by the lantern light that came through the open door. She saw the changing of his expression, the surprise, the new strength that came suddenly over him, making him seem to expand, to grow to a greater size. She saw the cold, bright gleam come into his eyes, as if for the first time in his life he were really seeing himself.

"Me?" he asked. "Why, I reckon I'm all right, Billy. I reckon I'm fine."

"Sorry, pardner," she said, trying to speak calmly, but unable to entirely hide the wild joy that was surging through her. "I shouldn't have asked. I should have known. And, Lane, whatever happens, we'll be together."

"Right. We'll be together. But we ain't lost yet. Mebbe—"

"Dry up, you!" growled the man who was untying his feet from under the horse's belly. "When we wanta hear you talk, we'll ask for it. You savvy?"

They were pulled from their horses and taken into the shack. And as they crossed the threshold, they saw Smiler Loomis for the first time in good light. And the sight of him stopped them short. They stood and stared.

Smiler put his head where the light would fall full across his scarred face. "Yeah, look at me! Stare good and long. I'm gunna tell you how I got this way. I'm gunna tell you who did it for me. And then I'm gunna have a little party for the two of you — a damn pleasant little party!"

He paused and sucked in his breath with a rasping rattle. "Once I was known along the border as Smiler Loomis. I was an outlaw and a damn good one. I was able to laugh at the law. Then along came a pair of gents and joined my band. They looked good to me, so I took them in. They were pardners. Nothin' could separate them. They swore by each other.

"Things went smooth enough for a time. Then one day one of these gents had a fallin' out with another of my men. His pardner stuck with him. I stepped in to stop it. The pair turned again' me. It came to gunplay. Hell broke loose in camp.

"When I come to, I found I was shot all to hell. I was more dead than alive. I didn't have a chance in ten thousand to pull through. But I won on that chance. Three of my men had lived through the fight. They stuck by me and fixed me up the best they could. They made me live and that was all. They saved me for a life of hell.

"Look at me, you two! Take a good, long look. This is the way I've been for thirty years. This is the way that pair of gun-fighters left me!" His voice rose wildly, breaking. His pale, sunken eyes became the eyes of a madman. His whole twisted form shook in the grip of a convulsion. "But I've lived these thirty years for a purpose. I've made those two gents pay. I've made them hate each other. A little at a time I've worked on them, pilin' up their misery. And tonight I've set the stage for the final play. I've sent the two of them into Paxton. They're gunna meet in the middle of the street. Tonight they're gunna kill each other—Sam Malone and Sol Weston!"

For an endless moment a dead silence hung in the shack. Lane Malone and Billy Weston stood rigid. Then the laugh of Smiler Loomis drifted through the room, like the drifting of a cold breeze.

It was this that seemed to awaken Malone. He lunged forward, dragging with him the two men who held his arms. He was almost upon Smiler before they could stop him. Smiler's bony hand brought a Colt winking from a shoulder holster. It lay snuggly in his grip, seeming strangely heavy and out of place in his wasted hand, but wavering never a whit.

"Why stop him?" he rasped. "I could've nailed him with a slug before he started, if I'd wanted. But then, mebbe it's best not to rush things. I

wanta take my time. I wanta make a perfect job of it. And I don't wanta kill either of them. I got plans for these two. I'm gunna make them over to look like their dads made me look. I'm gunna make them live the rest of their lives in hell. A Weston and a Malone that'll make people shudder to look at! Ain't that the best way, boys? Ain't that a fittin' way to end things? You're damned right it is! And right now's the best time to start it!"

IN Paxton another grim scene was drawing to a climax. The men of Smiler Loomis had timed their moves to perfection, and at almost the same moment Sam Malone and Sol Weston rode into town.

The street was deserted when Malone entered it. He pulled up in front of Gunnerson's saloon and swung down. He stood for a moment in the shadows, motionless, searching the street with a grim-eyed glance. His face was set, cold, expressionless. His hands went to his guns, loosening them in their holsters. All his old memories rushed over him at the feel of them. He was again a young man, bold, reckless, thrilling to danger.

He turned toward the lights and the noise of the saloon. He drew in a long, slow breath and then strode silently across the walk, pushed open the swing doors and entered.

Across the threshold he paused, his cold eyes searching the smoke-filled room. Weston was not in the crowd. And seeing this, Malone turned and strode out into the night again. He was on the sidewalk when he saw Weston striding down toward him, hands swinging slowly, brushing his gun butts. He wheeled about. And with a slow, crouching stride, went down the street to meet him.

Ten paces distant they halted. Each measured the other. Both were calm, deadly. And yet neither could help thinking back over the past to the times they had stood shoulder to shoulder as partners. The haunting memory of those days kept marching through the minds of both of them. Now, by the irony of fate, they stood here hating each other, ready to fight until one lay dying at the feet of the other.

"Malone!" called Sol Weston, his deep voice rumbling. "I'm waitin'. Flash your gun!"

"Weston, I was better with a gun than you in the old days," said Sam Malone. "I still am. I don't need no lead to beat you now. Make your draw. I'm waitin'!"

They stood tense, poised in the gunman's crouch, their gnarled old hands hovering over the black, worn butts of their low-swung guns.

"You asked for this, Malone!" said Weston hoarsely. "You start it."

"*I* asked for it!" shouted Malone. "I dunno how you figger that, Weston!"

"You've raised hell for me ever since I landed in these parts. You've rustled my stock. You once shot my son Tom. Shot him from ambush, like a low-down bushwhacker. And tonight you sent word to meet you in town and have it out. Now d'you still say you ain't asked for it?"

"*I* sent word!" yelled Sam Malone. "Are you aimin' to lie outta that, too, Weston? It was your man that come to me! And I've got every man on the Rafter M to prove it!"

"Hold on here a minute, Malone!" said Weston. "I sent no man to you. What d'you mean? It was year idea, this meetin'!"

"Weston, I never even thought of it until I got your message!"

Both of them suddenly relaxed. They stood staring at each other. Each in turn frowned, grew pale at some grim thought, and then frowned again. Their eyes met and locked—black eyes and gray—gleaming eyes that slowly lost the light of battle and softened.

Malone cleared his throat and spoke huskily. "Sol—you don't reckon somebody—somebody's tryin' to pull a whizzer on us, do you?" he asked.

"Sam—I dunno!" murmured Weston hoarsely.

"Mebbe we'd better set down — and sorta talk this over, Sol."

"Mebbe we better had," said Weston.

They looked at each other long and steadily, hunger for the old comradeship

they had once known for each other showing openly in their eyes.

"Sol, are we makin' fools outta ourselves?" asked Malone.

"I reckon we are!" said Weston.

A slow, wide grin overspread their weather-beaten faces. They strode forward, swiftly, eagerly. Their gnarled old hands met in a long grip. And there on the steps beside them they sat down to talk it over.

CHAPTER IX

SINGING GUNS

IN the tangled wilderness of the brakes, at the edge of the clearing, Bert Little stood and watched the shack where Smiler Loomis had taken his prisoners. He could hear the faint murmur of voices, but the distance was too great to distinguish the words.

He stood in the fringe of the willows, silent, watching the light in the windows. Buck was beside him, muscled shoulder brushing his leg. At his elbow stood the stallion, the starlight making a faint sheen on his golden-red coat.

Everything was quiet. Even the voices of the night were hushed to a whisper. Off behind the shack ran the Rio Grande, its muddy, sluggish current murmuring softly. Danger walked abroad. It was in the very air. It hovered all around him.

Then a twig cracked. Other human ears than those of Bert Little would not have heard it. But those three heard it, infinitely low though the sound had been. King threw his head high and stood looking off through night. Buck sank low to the ground, the hair along his neck bristling. Bert Little whirled and stepped with a silent tread deeper into the willows.

Buck went beside him, guiding him. Straight through the willows they went, with never a whisper of a sound to mark their passing. A small clearing opened up before them. And across that clearing, straight toward Little, was striding a man. Out into the open Bert Little stepped, one of his ivory-handled Colts poised in his hand. His low, terse voice broke the silence before the man saw him.

"Hold it, my friend!" he said. "Don't move so much as a finger!"

The man paused in midstride, crouching like a cat about to spring. Then he stood erect and relaxed. "Little!" he said softly. "You sorta startled me. Do you always come outta nowhere like that?"

"Dalt Weston," murmured Little in surprise. "What you doing here?"

"Followin' you," said Weston with perfect frankness.

"Aye? And why are you doing that?" asked Bert Little.

"You're headin' into danger, Little," said Weston. "Danger that belongs to the Westons and the Malones. I sorta followed along to be handy when I'm needed."

"I don't reckon I follow you, Weston," said Little.

"You're thinkin' of that fight back at the ranch, mebbe," said Weston. "Well, let's forget it. I didn't fight because I figgered you were lyin' about Billy and Lane Malone, because I believed that. You ain't the lyin' kind. I just wanted to see which of us was the best man. I found out."

"Aye. Go on, Weston," said Bert Little quietly.

"Well, when I come to, I learned what had happened. You were gone. But I caught my fastest horse and cut a wide circle. I picked up your trail and followed it. It almost killed my horse to keep up with you, but here I am. And I'm ready for anything you can fill my hands with, Little."

A silence fell. Little merely stood and looked at Weston. Weston spoke again.

"Look here, Little," he said. "This is Weston and Malone trouble, whatever it is. And you've been tryin' to straighten it out alone. I figger it's about time one of us showed you we can be white men, as well as damn fools. I wanta share whatever you're goin' into, if you'll have me."

"You'll shake on that, Weston?" said Bert Little.

"I ain't good enough to shake the hand

of a man like you, Bert," said Weston. "But if you want it, here it is!"

Their hands met in a powerful grip. Afterwards, Weston stepped back.

"Thanks, Bert," he said, his voice strangely husky.

Little changed the subject abruptly. "You see that light through the willows, Weston?"

"Yes, I see it. I was headed for it when I lost your trail in the brakes."

"Maybe I'm wrong, but I'd wager that's where your sister and young Malone are held," said Little. "The dog picked up the trail out beyond your corral, there by the willows. He led me here."

"Then let's go in," said Dalt Weston. "Let's clean them out!"

"Aye, but easy does it, *amigo*," murmured Little. "If the two are there, there's men and guns to guard them. Who they might be, I can't even guess. You follow. We'll look things over a bit."

THEY went back to the edge of the clearing again, and paused to consider.

"We can't see anything from back here," said Little. "We have to get up to one of those windows."

"All right," said Dalt Weston at once. "You lead out, Little. I'm with you."

"There's that tall grass," pointed Little. "A gent might worm his way through that and come to the rear of the cabin."

"Sure, but what's wrong with walkin' straight up to it?" asked Weston. "They don't expect nobody. They won't be watchin' close."

"You see that hollow over yonder?" said Little. "There's a guard watching the shack from there. Buck pointed him out to me. And I don't know how many more there might be. There's seven horses. That's five besides the girl and Malone. They're not all inside the shack, maybe. We'll follow the grass and not take chances, Weston."

"All right," said Weston. "You're the boss, Little. You lead out."

They were halfway to the cabin when trouble fell suddenly from the skies upon them. The horses had grazed nearer while they were crawling slowly forward. Now one of them suddenly became startled at the faint movement of the grass. It leaped backward, snorting, and rushed wildly across the clearing.

Out of the gully rushed the guard, his rifle held at the ready. Straight in at the spot where Little and Weston were hidden, like the deadly charge of a grizzly, he ran. There was not one chance in ten thousand that he would fail to find them. That, then, was the thing to plan on, and when the guard was within reaching distance to rise up and strike him senseless. To rouse the camp now would be to lose everything. This, by his greater coolness and wisdom, Bert Little knew. So he lay there in the grass without stirring.

Dalt Weston, however, failed to catch Little's whispered warning. It seemed to him that there was but one thing to do. So he rose suddenly to his feet, his guns flashing swiftly into his hands.

With a loud, ringing shout, the man slid to a halt. His rifle leaped to his shoulder. Flame spurted from its muzzle. And the night was awakened by the crashing thunder of the shot.

This long Dalt Weston waited; and then his Colt belched flame, its booming thunder joining the echoes of the rifle shot.

They saw the guard spin awkwardly around and lean forward at the middle. They heard his body strike the ground with a soft, sliding thud. The light in the cabin winked out. The door burst open. And into the night came the gunmen of Smiler Loomis.

THEN up from the grass rose Bert Little. Into his hands flashed his famous ivory-handled Colts. Up they came and burst suddenly into their death song. It was an inferno of flashing orange-red tongues of flame, of crashing thunder and hoarse cries, of whining lead that swept across the clearing. Death stalked through that flame-lashed darkness. Death stalked and struck and passed on with a relentless swiftness. The crashing roll of gunshots beat in

upon the ears with a deafening crescendo. Men fell, and their blood stained the hard-beaten ground, there on the bank of the Rio Grande.

Straight in toward the outlaws of Smiler Loomis, with slow, stalking strides went Bert Little, his longhorn guns leaping and rebounding in his hands. Beside him stalked big Dalt Weston, laughing softly. Gun smoke trailed from their weapons, drifting and curling around their brown, grim-set faces.

Inside the shack Smiler Loomis rolled himself to the floor. And with a gun gripped in either hand, he crawled to the door to add his own deadly guns to the inferno. He gained the doorway, crawled through it, and braced himself up against the front wall of the cabin. He raised his guns slowly, chose Dalt Weston for his target, and made his Colts leap into flaming life.

Dalt Weston staggered and went down. He pulled himself up and staggered on. But again he fell. Bert Little turned. Lead from his ivory-handled guns found Smiler, driving his deformed body back against the wall, driving him back and down, driving life from his twisted form. And Smiler, in that last moment of life, took two tottering strides forward, shuddered and fell headlong. He rolled upon his back, his pale, sightless eyes staring up at the cold, gleaming stars.

Silence fell upon the clearing. It was the waiting, hollow silence of death. Dalt Weston pushed himself up to his knees and stared long and silently up at the tall silhouette of Bert Little. Slowly he sighed and murmured softly to himself.

"And he's the gent—I thought—I could handle!"

Into Paxton the four came finally, the girl and Malone leading, Dalt Weston and Bert Little following. Into town they came with their horses lathered, a terrible dread of the thing they would find freezing their hearts and their minds. Up the Gunnerson's saloon they thundered and slid from their horses. And then they stopped dead still and stared in stunned disbelief at what they saw before them.

There on the steps of the hotel veranda sat Sam Malone and Sol Weston. They were laughing and talking together.

"Look there," said Dalt Weston scornfully, but grinning widely. "'A pair of curly wolves. Come down here with blood in their eye. And look at them!"

Bert Little smiled slowly. "It's a wise man who knows when to fight and when to be peaceful."

Lane Malone and Billy Weston smiled. Billy said, "It's a good thing for all of us, Bert, that you knew when to fight."

Old Sol Weston got to his feet. "All this here calls for a celebration, don't you reckon, Sam?"

"Right!" butted in Dalt Weston. "And the first drink is to Bert Little."

A slow smile crept over Little's face. "The first is to the happiness of Lane and Billy," he said.

Dalt Weston grinned. "We sure won't fight about it, Bert."

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Great "Duke Buckland" Novelet

By FREDERICK C. DAVIS

Author of "Sixes and Spades," "Dead Man's Boots," etc.

Duke Buckland risked a hangman's noose to answer Tally Stanton's call. Instead of open arms and happy smiles, a leveled six-gun greeted him. Then masked killers swooped down on the town of Stanton Fork, leaving behind a bullet-riddled corpse and lynch fever. The town blamed that notorious owl-hooter, Black Jack Spade, who was none other than Duke Buckland. Duke vowed to pay off in lead, but stunned and heart-sickened, he learned that he had made a promise he couldn't keep.

A CLATTER of stones, echoing sharply between the walls of the little pass, sent "Duke" Buckland's hand flashing Coltward. He twisted in the saddle to glimpse a black movement behind him—a shadowed rider blocking the way he had come, moonlight glinted on a leveled gun. His spurs tucked hard and his voice rang warningly to the young Westerner jogging at his side.

"Ride, Kit!"

"Hands up!"

The command rasped from the rider at the mouth of the little pass as Buckland and Kit McCane spurted forward. Instantly they heaved back in the saddle, bearing on straining reins, as a second rider whirled into view. He appeared straight ahead, swiftly barring the trail out with a sparkling six-gun. His order echoed the first in a tone that threatened hot lead.

"Grab sky!"

Duke Buckland's thumb dragged at the hammer of his Colt while White Man reared. His swift glance showed him Kit McCane whipping a six-gun free of its holster. His left hand lightninged out; his fingers trapped McCane's wrist. He thrust the boy's six downward, and he lowered the hammer of his own.

"Steady, Kit! Hold your lead! They've got us covered—cold!"

He sat motionless in the saddle, erect and statuesque, glancing both ways along the little pass. His eyes, bright as twin blue stars, shone coldly. When he straightened, he lifted nerveless hands above his head, glancing from one to the other of the two riders, who had stationed themselves to imprison him and his partner within the bleak, sheer walls.

"Easy!" he warned again. "We're cornered! Tryin' to ride out will get us drilled!"

Kit McCane's hands went up. His tanned freckled face lost color. He peered at the two guns leveling at them from opposite sides; he glanced anxiously into Buckland's hard face. His voice came, a sibilant whisper in the silence of the pass.

"Gosh, Duke, I savvied we was headin' into dangerous country! Those gents 've been trailin'—"

"Stand where you are!" a sharp command rang from the rider who had so swiftly appeared to block the rear trail. "Keep your paws off'n your sparkers, if you ain't hankerin' to get perforated. I'm aimin' to collect 'em pronto!"

The one rider jogged forward, his six-gun waving and glinting in the moonglow. When he drew up beside Buckland and McCane, another sparkle of light shone—a gleam reflecting from a silver

His hands clutched desperately at loose rock.

star pinned on his vest. A lawman. Buckland's lips curved wryly; McCane glared. The lawman grabbed their guns away, and a jerk of his Colt emphasized his next command:

"Head out!"

Buckland turned White Man slowly, and McCane shifted to stay at his side. They rode toward the second rider, hands still lifted, while two sixes watched them warily. When they jogged into the open, both men drew behind them. From the lips of one, a chuckle came.

"Keep ridin' straight ahead, jaspers! We're takin' you to Stanton Fork. We're goin' to lock you nice and snug in the jail. We'll be gettin' a couple of rope neckties ready for you plumb immediate. Ride on!"

"We got 'em, Frank!" the second man exclaimed exultingly. "Got 'em slick! Black Jack Spade and his podner!"

DUKE BUCKLAND rose with hands lifted, his lips pressed tight. At the edge of the verdant mesa, which reached to the mouth of the little pass, trees grew, and on one of them the moonlight showed a placard tacked. Buckland knew the words printed on it—knew them by heart. His eyes were bitter as he read them again:

$10,000 REWARD
For the Capture
Dead or Alive
of the Outlaw
Known as
BLACK JACK SPADE

Behind Duke Buckland, alias "Black Jack" Spade, two lawmen rode now with six-guns leveled.

"You never savvied you was spotted, did you, Spade?" one of them demanded triumphantly. "You never knew we saw you and your podner makin' camp back by Sunabout Crick at sundown. We spotted you easy from the descriptions. We've been lookin' for you a long time, Spade—and now you're got!"

Buckland said nothing.

"Lookin' for you, Spade," the other echoed, "not only on account you're a badman wanted in every state west of the Mississippi. Not a-tall! We've got a special reason for invitin' you to a little necktie party. We savvy you're headin' the gang that's been ridin' high, wide, and fancy around here—but you ain't headin' it no more! No more!"

Kit McCane answered in cold fury. "You gents're loco! We ain't headin' any gang. We don't savvy nothing about it. My podner 'n' me, we come ridin' into this county for the first time less 'n' an hour ago. If you're lookin' for the leader of some outlaw gang, you got the wrong hombres!"

"We've got our own opinion on that!"

Duke Buckland's blue eyes shifted alertly to the wrathful face of Kit McCane. "There ain't no use denyin' it, Kit," he said quietly. "Once a man starts ridin' the owl-hoot, the law sees him guilty of plenty he never done. Talkin' won't help us none. It's got to come sometime, Kit—getin' roped—and it looks like this is the time."

McCane's anxious eyes sought Buckland's. "You'd 've shot your way out if it hadn't been for me, Duke!" he exclaimed. "You let 'em grab us because you were afraid of me gettin' drilled. Shucks, Duke, shucks—I'd rather take a slug in the heart 'n see you take a hangin', podner!"

"The same goes for me about you, Kit," Buckland answered softly. "Only, this trip—"

"Duke, there's been somethin' preyin' on your mind," McCane cut in. "You come headin' into this dangerous country deliberate. You've been ridin' hell-a-tilt and scarcely stoppin' for grub or sleep. Ever since you got that letter, Duke—"

"I had a special reason for ridin' in here," Buckland interrupted. "A plump special reason, Kit. Only now——"

"Quit your chinnin'!" a command rang behind them. "Keep follerin' that trail! It ain't goin' to end for you two gents till you come to Hangman's Hickory and then——"

A sudden roar of guns blasted the words away. Bullet-lightning struck without warning out of the blackness of the trail-side.

SLUGS screamed in swift parade from behind a black rock. They passed Buckland and McCane with waspish whines; they brought startled shouts from the two men riding behind. On the instant, the guns of the deputies turned to the rock from behind which the attack came. Lead clashed lead with savage fury.

White Man bounded as Duke Buckland spun from the saddle. He glimpsed the two deputies darting aside. He heard one of them bellow with pain. That man's six-gun dropped from his hand, and Buckland leaped for it. He brought it up flaring fire. The disarmed deputy howled again, ducked low to the neck of his horse, and dashed wildly for tree shadows farther beyond.

Buckland caught no glimpse of the attacker behind the rock. His lean form tightened into a leap that carried him toward the pony of the second deputy. He sprang from behind, and his one hand flashed to strike down the deputy's gun. He dragged back and the deputy spilled off the leather. They sprawled in the dust of the trail, kicking, squirming, until the bore of Buckland's Colt jabbed hard to the deputy's chest.

"You're through fightin'!"

Kit McCane sprang alertly to Buck-

land's side. He grabbed away the pinioned man's six. He brought from the deputy's belt Buckland's gun and his own. His breath beating hotly, he straightened to listen, and heard rippling hoofbeats. He peered at the black rock from which the attack had come, and still there was no movement around it.

"The other dep's headin' for town, Duke!" McCane gasped. "He'll be comin' back right quick with a posse! Who threw down on 'em? It come from over there, but——"

Startled, Kit McCane broke off. Buckland's head lifted. A rustle sounded now near the rock; a black figure rose out of the darkness. It hurried close, a long coat flapping at every step, a broad-brimmed hat pulled low, a smoking Colt leveled. The figure stopped near Buckland and spoke sibilantly.

"Tie him up! We've got to clear away from here! If we don't——"

Far in the distance the hoofbeats sounded. Buckland peered into the shaded face of the shadow figure. McCane blinked in confusion. The deputy on the ground squirmed defiantly, and Buckland's six-gun pressed hard.

"Tie him! Quick!"

Buckland tore off his bandana; he twisted the deputy's hands, and lashed them tight in the small of the man's back. He jerked the deputy up with his Colt unwavering and commanded:

"That's right——we got to clear out! Get on your horse! We're ridin'!"

Climbing onto White Man, Buckland glanced again and again at the figure in the long coat as the captured deputy took the saddle. They jogged away, with the unknown attacker leading the way. They spurted across the mesa until they reached rockier territory; and then the sibilant voice came again.

"Follow this trail! There's an old cabin ahead! We'll put him there!"

Still bewildered, increasingly alert, they followed the winding way through thick tree shadows, up a steep slope. They came to a shack sitting high above the mesa. Buckland pulled the deputy down and forced him to the door. They strode into thick darkness and listened.

A match scratched sharply. Held in the hand of Kit McCane, its flare filled the four musty walls. In the flickering light, Buckland and McCane peered into the face of the whispering figure. A girl.

SHE stepped back quickly, and raised her arm to shadow her face before the deputy could glimpse it. Anxiously she exclaimed: "Don't! Put it out!" and McCane dropped the match. He heeled the coal to the floor as darkness filled the shack again, as the the husky voice of the deputy sounded.

"You don't stand a chance of gettin' away from the noose we promised you, Spade! Not a chance! There'll be a posse on your trail before you can cut across the county line!"

"I reckon," Buckland said quietly, "I'm takin' my chance on that."

In the flash of light, he had glimpsed a bunk in the corner. He thrust his captive against its post. With McCane's bandana, he bound the man again, arms around it. He backed away, hearing the girl's quick breathing, and thrust the Colt into his hostler.

"You'll be stayin' here awhile, Jasper," he said coldly. "If anybody trails us, you won't be with 'em! We're sayin' good night."

The girl hurried first out of the shack and to her pony. McCane followed Buckland, his amazed eyes never leaving her. Once in the saddle, they spurted down the trail. Once they reached the mesa, they shifted across rolling green territory. They were far from the abandoned cabin, far from the spot at which the attack had occurred, when they paused. No word was spoken until Buckland gazing at the girl, said in a quiet tone:

"You asked me, Tally, and I came."

The girl blurted: "Duke! Duke, I thought you weren't coming. I thought my letter didn't reach you. I'd almost given up hope!"

McCane's amazement grew as he listened. Now in the moonlight he could see the girl's face clearly. It was firm and strong; her eyes were alight with anxiety. McCane saw Buckland gazing

at her steadily; saw him wince as if with pain when her small hand reached to his.

"I reckon that letter followed me through half a dozen states before it caught up with me, Tally," Buckland said quietly. "Soon as I read it, I started comin'. I told you once if you ever needed me——"

"But Duke——I didn't know!" The girl's wide eyes searched Buckland's face. "I saw you riding toward the pass, Duke, and I followed you. Then I saw Brophy and Lombard ride ahead to close you in. I didn't know what to think, so I kept following, and I heard what they said. Duke, I didn't know that——you're Black Jack Spade!"

"I reckon you heard right, Tally," Buckland said. "I reckon I'm Spade."

"I wouldn't have asked you to come if I'd known that!" the girl exclaimed. "I wouldn't have asked you to take the risk. It's dangerous—your coming here. If they catch you again, Duke——"

"Shucks, Tally," Duke Buckland said quietly. "That ain't botherin' me any. A gent sort of gets used to danger, ridin' the owl-hoot. You asked me to come, and I'm here."

THE girl's hand pressed Buckland's more tightly. "That's like you, Duke!" she said impulsively. "I do need your help—desperately. I had to try to get you away from Brophy and Lombard. There's no one else I can turn to."

"I reckon you can count on me."

"But, Duke, you've got to clear out. It's true—there'll be a posse out for you right away. If you don't get out of the county, they'll track you down. I know what that means. I can't ask you to run that chance. Head out, Duke—now—please!"

"Shucks," Duke Buckland said. "I'm stayin'."

"Even if——"

"You're needin' help, and I'm staying. Kit and me—my podner here—we're used to bein' looked for. We're plumb weathered to dodgin' lawmen's loops. I reckon if you'll tell me what trouble you're in——"

"There's no time now, Duke! I've got to get back to town. It would be the worst thing possible if Sheriff Caldwell suspected I'm the one who got you away from Brophy and Lombard. Duke! Tomorrow morning, at sunup, at Arrow Pass—meet me there!"

The girl spun her pony; her spurs tinkled. She spurted into a run that took her swiftly across the mesa. Duke Buckland gazed after her until she disappeared in the darkness; and then his gaze dropped slowly to the hand that hers had clasped. Her touch lingered on his fingers, warm and soft. Sadness came into his eyes, sadness that deepeded into a glitter of pain.

Kit McCane blurted: "Duke, you're sure a surprisin' gent! You never told me why we kept headin' down here. Wantin' to help her, that's why you kept ridin' night and day, soon as you got the letter. She's plumb pretty, Duke. Knowin' a girl like that—me, I'd never 've taken the trail away from her!"

Buckland's blue eyes narrowed. "Kit, you and me, we've been saddle-matin' quite a spell now. It ain't goin' to seem natural for me to go headin' on alone for a spell, but you better be turning back. Cut across the Line, Kit, and wait for me somewheres until I——"

"Cut stick from you, Duke?" McCane blurted. "No, siree! I ain't doin' that. I'm stickin' with you."

"Kit, my ridin' you into this trouble, it ain't fair," Buckland insisted. "The lawmen around here are lookin' for us proper. Next time they grab us we won't be gettin' away none. You know what it means, podner—hangin'. I ain't figurin on you takin' that chance. Comin' down here to help Tally is somethin' I can't help doin', but it ain't no reason for you to risk the noose. Head back, Kit! Now!"

"Duke," Kit McCane interrupted quietly, "no matter where you go headin', I'm ridin' with you. If you go burnin' the win plumb through the gates o' hell, I'm goin' to be right there aside you. Nothin' you can say'll hold me back!"

Buckland straightened "Right now" ——he gazed intently across the moon-

lighted mesa in the direction the girl had gone—"I'm headin' into town."

"Into town, Duke? Where the sheriff is? Where they've got your description and every man is itchin' to collect the rewards on your head."

"Into town, Kit," Buckland insisted. "Pronto! Are you ridin' with me, podner?"

"I'm with you, Duke!" McCane exclaimed quickly. "Sure, Duke! Lead the way!"

Shoulder to shoulder, their ponies broke into a run. Straight across the mesa they rode, toward a town where danger lay.

"I RECKON, Kit," Buckland said quietly as they rode with the wind, "you figger that helpin' Tally Stanton out of trouble is plumb important to me. You figger right. I'ain't aimin' to let a posse keep me from it."

"Did you know her, Duke, before you ——"

"Before I hit the owl-hoot? That was a plumb long time ago. I was footloose then, and I was punchin' on the spread Tally's dad owned—the Block S. As I recollect it, we're headin' for that ranch now on the way to town. Shucks, Kit, she——"

Buckland's throat grew tight, and McCane saw wretchedness come into his eyes.

"We were figgerin' on gettin' married. It seemed to me then I was the happiest hombre livin'. Havin' Tally, there wasn't nothin' near heaven I could wish for. Seein' her again, it brings it all back. Thinkin' of it, Kit, it hurts worse'n' a bullet in my hide. It's all gone now because, bein' a owl-hooter, I can't never——"

The ponies swerved along a barbed-wire fence, traveling swiftly through quiet night.

"I reckon the owl-hoot was drawin' me even then, though, Kit," Buckland went on tightly. "You see, one day about a week before the weddin' was to be, I started playin' a game of cards with four other gents in town. Whether I was winnin' or losin', I don't remember now and it didn't matter at the time. I was colddecked. I never realized it till there was a pile of chips on the table, with me and Flashy Morgan bettin' the limit. We laid down our hands and the next thing I knew Flashy was lyin dead on the floor, and my six-gun was smokin' in my hand.

"The sheriff come gunnin' for me. I had to light out, I had to hit the owl-hoot. From that day to this, Kit, I've never been off of it. As long as I live, I'll have to keep on followin' the back-trails, watchin' for any lawman that might try to collect the rewards on my pelt."

Buckland glanced backward, a quick, instinctive gesture made by a hunted man.

"He cheated you, Duke?" Kit McCane asked quickly. "That gent you drilled?"

"Cheated me, Kit," Buckland answered. "Out of that big pile of chips and out of everything good life has to offer. He cheated me of Tally and a home." Buckland's blue eyes glittered anew. "He was holdin' a flush, Kit—jack high—spades. Me, I was holdin' four jacks. There was two of 'em in the deck, Kit, two spade jacks. I kept holdin' one of 'em in my hand when I drilled him."

"Then that's why, Duke!" McCane exclaimed. "That's why the jack of spades is your mark, that's why they call you ——"

"You figger it right, Kit!"

Buckland swung out of the saddle as they reached a gate in the barbed-wire fence. He strode to it and his voice came huskily. "That's why I'm called——"

His hand was on the loop when a sudden burst of hoofbeats sounded. From the black shadow of a clump of trees a few yards away, a rider spurted. He swung up sharply, his ugly face twisted with a scowl, his hand leveling a Colt at Duke Buckland.

"Get back!" he commanded. "Stay away from that gate! Try comin' in here and you'll take a slug through the heart!"

BUCKLAND took a quick step backward. A click sounded as the hammer of the six-gun poised. He stood motionless, and his gaze lowered to a post of the fence. A brand marked it, a Block

S. Buckland's lids lowered as he gazed at it, and the muscles of his jaws bunched hard.

"Clear out of here pronto!" the harsh command came from the horseman. "Reckon you must be strangers, or you wouldn't figger on tryin' to come onto this spread. I'm warning you once and that's all! Step foot on the Block S, and you'll die!"

Quietly Buckland said: "Reckon you're right, mister. We're strangers. No harm meant."

"Never mind chinnin'! Get on your hoss and clear out! I sort of feel the hammer of this gun slippin'!"

Buckland's face was dark-lined as he returned to White Man's saddle. With McCane at his side, he jogged away, feeling the stare of the sentry following him. He shifted again to follow the fence and glanced back. The mounted man was gone; he had moved again into the shadows of the trees; but from that shelter, Buckland knew, the leveled six was still peering.

"Gosh, Duke, I reckon that jasper meant what he said!" McCane blurted. "The whole ranch must be guarded. He looked like a killer, Duke!"

"A killer," Buckland affirmed, "and this is the ranch I repped for—the Block S, belongin' then to Tally's dad. If she's lost it, Kit——"

He paused, peering at the ranch-house on the rise across the fence. It was lightless. An air of desolation hung about it. Its windows were gaping holes; every pane had been shattered. Bullet marks pocked the walls. In the ranch yard, grass grew rank and yellow. No gleam shone from any of the shacks; yet there were movements in the shadows. In them men were on watch.

"Gosh, the spread's gone to ruin, Duke!" McCane blurted. "You can see plumb far, but there ain't a head of beef in sight. No herd! Nothin' but——

A sharp report sounded. In the deep shadow beside the stable, a dart of fire flashed. Through the air, from a hidden rifle, sang a slug that hissed its warning close to Buckland's head. His hand snapped to the butt of his Colt; but he did not draw. He saw a glitter of moonlight on a rifle barrel as it raised for a second shot.

He sent White Man plunging away. Kit McCane kept at his side until they reached the main road. There, out of sight of the desolate house, they pulled rein and peered back. Grimly Buckland's fingers twined about the butt of his six-gun.

"Kit, it looks like the gang is holdin' that ranch. Maybe they've got it by rights, maybe they ain't. I'm aimin' to find out which. If they've taken it away from Tally, it means we'll have the gang on one side of us and the law on the other, fightin' 'em both. I'm warnin' you again, Kit—you better ride back!"

Quietly McCane asked: "You ain't headin' back, are you, Duke?"

"No, Kit! No!"

"Then I reckon," McCane answered quietly, "we're moseyin' right on together."

THEY APPROACHED the town of Stanton Fork cautiously. Its main street curved between two rows of weather-blackened shacks. At its hitch racks horses were dozing. Yellow shafts of lamplight slanted from the windows of a bar, and a general store, and a restaurant. Riding close, Buckland paused, reading a sign above the restaurant door:

TALLY'S KITCHEN

He glimpsed the girl through the window. She was working at a sink behind the shining counter. Two cowpokes were perched on stools, eating as though famished from plates she had just placed in front of them. Buckland slipped down and gestured McCane to follow. They were striding toward the entrance of the kitchen when the swinging doors of the bar adjoining slapped open, and four men herded out.

"I'll handle her proper!" the one who led the way declared harshly.

Duke Buckland stepped back as the four tramped to the door of Tally's kitchen. The speaker was a giant of a man, with a brutal, square face in which narrow-set eyes were shadowed by ominous

brows. His thick lips took on an ugly curl as he thrust open the restaurant door. He slammed it; he strode heavily to the counter. The two cowpokes shifted uneasily on their stools and ceased eating; the girl advanced with chin lifted defiantly.

"Miles Hawkes, what do want here?" she asked.

Hawkes glared. "I come in here to tell you that you're closin' your place up. You're goin' out of business."

Color left the girl's cheeks, but her cool gaze did not waver. "I haven't any intention of doing that," she declared. "I'm going to keep right on running my restaurant as long——"

"You can keep right on running it," Hawkes broke in, "but you ain't goin' to get any more business. You figger on your pretty face to drawn in trade. Buck here, he's my friend, and since you opened up, the boy's 've stopped comin' to his place. I ain't aimin' to see him go broke. I see that my friends are treated right. You"——Hawkes said it heavily—— "don't happen to be a friend of mine."

The girl's hands formed into angry fists. "Mr. Hawkes," she said evenly, "I want you to get out."

"I'm gettin' out!" Hawkes snapped. "I've warned you!" He jabbed a threatening finger toward the two punchers eating at the counter. "You jaspers clear out of here! Clear out pronto! If I ever find you comin' in here again, you'll lose your appetite quick!"

The two young men gulped and slid off their stools. "Why, sure, Mr. Hawkes," one of them numbled. "We were just finishin', anyway. Miss Tally, your grub's right good but—I reckon we've had enough!" They dodged past Hawkes and pushed out the door. The big man turned an ugly grin on the girl.

Duke Buckland gazed through the window at Tally Stanton's white face as Miles Hawkes tramped out. The three other men followed him, and to one of them Hawkes ordered:

"Stay there, Curly, right at the door. If anybody starts comin' in, you tell 'em Miles Hawkes says Buck dishes out better grub. It's goin' to be plumb unhealthy to eat in there!"

The big man strode away. The other, called Curly, leaned against the wall, his evil eyes shifting to Buckland. Buckland's gaze was icy as he began to move toward the door. He took a step, and Kit McCane's hand grasped his arm. The boy's words were a whisper.

"Duke! That rider headin' in! He's the dep——the other one that tried to grab us!"

BUCKLAND stepped aside warily into a shadow. Kit McCane spun beside him. Together they eyed the rider rushing into town. His pony was laboring; his holster was empty; his gunhand was crusted with blood. He did not glimpse Buckland and McCane as he sped past; he headed toward a lighted doorway beyond.

"That's him, Duke!" McCane declared again. "There's goin' to be hell a-poppin' in a minute!"

"Kit," Buckland said quickly, "stick close and follow me! I'm aimin' to get the lay of the land."

He stepped past the little restaurant and quickly strode to the open space at the rear. McCane kept at his side as they hurried behind the bar. Reaching a narrow space between two shacks, they sidled into it and worked their way in the darkness toward the road. Directly opposite stood a small structure, its door open and streaming light. Into it the deputy had stridden, and above it a sign read:

SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Three men inside were visible to Buckland. The deputy, nursing his wounded hand, was talking rapidly to the other two. One was a lean, wiry man with a coldly determined face; he was wearing a sheriff's star. The long hair of the other was snow-white over a young face; his body was compact, strong. He demanded of the deputy sharply:

"You sure of that, Brophy? It was Spade and his podner? They ain't had time to get out of the county yet?"

"There ain't no mistake!" the breathless Brophy answered. "When I lost my

gun, I hightailed it out of there because they was three to my one, but I cut back toward the county line. The only trail out, up that way, is Gilford Pass, and they didn't go through it. They're hidin' somewhere in the hills, I tell you. If we look sharp, we'll find 'em!"

The white-haired man straightened grimly. "I reckon we'll find 'em! Sheriff, I'm ridin' with you. I ain't aimin' to see the gang rule the roost here any longer. I hate the guts of outlaws and Spade is one I'm aimin' to see finished. Get your men together and we'll smoke that rattler out of his hole!"

"Spade leadin' the gang!" Lean Sheriff Caldwell had reached for a gun harness; he was buckling it on. "We should 've known it was some coyote like him! We'll smoke him out, all right! Hangin' that jasper'll rid the country of the worst outlaw that ever——What's that?"

The sheriff broke off as a burst of hoofbeats sounded. The rhythm echoed between the fronts of the shacks more loudly each second. Wind carried dust into the air before Duke Buckland glimpsed the flying hoofs. Sheriff Caldwell and the white-haired man crowded to the door of the shack as a cordon of riders swung close.

Masked. Buckland saw evil eyes glinting above the bandanas drawn tight across the riders' faces. In their hands six-guns glittered, guns that thundered suddenly.

Flame flashed as the masked horsemen turned their sixes upon the sheriff's shack. A savage fusillade stirred echoes in the hills as sharp cries broke out. The band spurted on, still firing, the flashing hoofs of their ponies stirring new clouds of dust as they raced past.

Through the haze Buckland peered——peered to see the white-haired man falling, his shirt blotted with blood, falling and dead before he struck the ground.

BULLETS cracked into the board walls from the guns of the masked killers as they sped into the open. They had raced out of the night and murdered their victim with scarcely a stop; now they were speeding again into covering darkness. A stunned paralysis held in their wake, a tight silence that was broken by the hoarse shout of Sheriff Caldwell.

"They've killed Tom Masters!"

The sheriff sprang through the door, six-gun in his hand, and stooped above the fallen old-timer as Buckland grimly watched. Deputy Brophy crowded close. Up and down the road footfalls sounded as men came running from open doors. Caldwell straightened, his face dark-lined in the light, and sprang toward a pony dancing at the hitchrack.

"Ride after 'em, men! They killed Tom Masters without givin' him a chance. Black Jack Spade's the head of the gang. He's hidin' out there. Git ridin' and find that rattler. Find Spade and shoot him on sight!"

The sheriff slapped into the saddle and his spurs drove hard. His cinnamon horse carried him through wafting dust, into the darkness through which the masked killers were riding for cover. Behind him men scurried toward their ponies. They hit the leather and spurred after the sheriff, guns in their hands, their angry voices carrying to Duke Buckland.

"Spade'll pay for that!"

"Tom Masters, the finest gent who ever lived!"

"Killin's too good for Spade now!"

"Get Spade! Get Spade!"

They sped out of sight down the road, into the open night beyond the town. Duke Buckland, his eyes narrowed, began to back away. He paused when he saw a girl hurry into the light. Tally Stanton. She paused, peering in horror at the fallen Tom Masters, and watched while the old man was carried inside. Her face was white when she turned away. Buckland sidled back from the light, his jaw clamped, his eyes blue fury.

He did not speak as he hastened across the space behind the buildings. He hurried to White Man, gunhand alert, and swung aboard. He rubbed spurs with Kit McCane at his side, and they swung to the drywash of the highway. Once beyond the lights of the town, Buckland pulled rein. His glittering eyes searched

the dust as Kit McCane sat with gun ready.

"Duke!" the boy blurted. "All of 'em think you're leadin' the gang! Gosh, Duke—they think of you bein' a low-down skunk like that when you're the up-standin'est gent who ever forked a hoss! If they grab you now, Duke, they'll string you up without givin' you a chance!"

Buckland straightened. "I ain't aimin' to take the blame for a sneakin' killin' like that, Kit! They can call me an outlaw, but they can't call me a coyote. If they string me up, it won't be for shootin' an old man down!"

"There's only one way you can prove you didn't do it, Duke!" Kit McCane exclaimed. "That's by gettin' the leader of the gang, gettin' the skunk responsible for it. It's the only way, Duke!"

Buckland peered intently into the darkness, in the direction the masked riders had gone.

"The only way, Kit, and I'm takin' it!"

BUCKLAND rode quickly along the drywash, his movements tense, his eyes alert. Kit McCane sat on guard in the saddle when he dropped down. He kneeled, and studied marks in the dust. He crept on, intent upon the maze of horseshoe imprints left by the killers and the posse. When he climbed back to the saddle, his eyes were shining anew; his fingers were curling tightly around the butt of his Colt.

He spurred on, with McCane at his side. When he paused again it was to examine tracks which crossed the drywash. He shifted sharply to follow them across a grassy rise. He saw that the masked gang had scattered, but he followed the tracks of the rider who had led the way. Reading sign that other eyes might have missed in the gloom, he rode with Kit McCane until he reached jumbled territory far from Stanton Fork.

He paused alertly, listening to sounds carrying on the wind. The dull drumming of a pony's hoofs reached his ears; and after a moment the rhythm slowed and stopped. Buckland turned grimly in that direction. As he rode, he heard horses again, riders approaching from separated points. He jerked rein suddenly when he saw the dark movement of a rider drifting down a rise.

The rider vanished into a gulch beyond. Duke Buckland sat still in the saddle, waiting. Soon another appeared, and went along the same trail, melting into the night. A third followed, in and out of sight. A fourth approached more rapidly, hesitated at the mouth of the gully, then dismounted. Buckland's eyes followed the dark flutter of movement and he silently eased closer.

Voices came to his ears as he dropped from the saddle. With Kit McCane at his side, he crept ahead. He came to thick-growing bushes and raised to peer across them. In the darkness of a depression, he saw horses and men. The ponies were panting after a hard run; the men were gathered in a circle; and in the moonlight Buckland saw that their faces were still masked.

A low voice reached him. "You're taking orders from me! I'm leadin' you! You'll do as I say!"

A guttural mumble answered.

"Head back for the Block S!" the low voice resumed with a note of authority. "Stay there—out of sight! Savvy that? Any jasper who don't cotton to those orders—speak up!"

There was silence.

"Clear out pronto!"

The men shifted out of the circle, leaving one figure standing alone. Buckland's gaze did not shift from it as the half score of men returned to their saddles. He waited while the riders climbed from the hollow because their leader waited. He remained motionless until the masked men were riding out of hearing because the lone figure below did not move. Eyes slitted, he kept his gaze on that shadow form, and his words to Kit McCane were less than a whisper.

"That's the skunk I'm promisin' a bullet to!"

The lone figure turned quietly and trod up the slope. Buckland rose, moving with silent steps, in that direction. He saw the gang leader stride to the waiting pony. He heard the creak of leather as

the dark figure mounted. He tensed; and he sprang. He sprang into the open with one hand reaching out, with Colt bared and hammer drawn.

"Reach for the stars!"

His fingers snapped to the pony's bridle. His gun glittered threats at the figure in the saddle. A sharp gasp sounded from the lips hidden by the bandana mask. Shining eyes stared down at him. Kit McCane sped to Buckland's side, and his swift words echoed Buckland's order.

"You heard him, jasper! Reach!"

The hands of the rider lifted slowly. The low-toned voice came through the mask: "What do you want?"

Buckland's eyes glinted as brightly as the metal of his Colt. "You, hombre," he said evenly. "I'm wantin' you. I heard you say you're the leader of the gang. I saw your gang shoot old Tom Masters down. I'm aimin' to see you pay for that—like you deserve!"

No word came from the taut-muscled rider.

"And I'm aimin' to see," Buckland declared tightly, "your face!"

He reached up quickly. His fingers caught the lower edge of the bandana mask. His lips curled wryly as he jerked it down. And, seeing the face of the leader of the gang, he stood frozen.

Moonlight shone clearly on the rider's features. The wide eyes were lighted with consternation, the lips parted with sudden pain. They faced each other in the gloom—Buckland, his six still leveled, and the girl in the saddle. Tally Stanton.

Hers were the clothes of a man. Her hair was tucked tightly inside her Stetson. The hands she held raised were begrimmed and her face was dusty and dark. Buckland stared as though bewildered by the confusion of the moonlight; but he straightened, cold with the certainity.

"Duke—Duke!" the girl blurted. "You don't——"

Alarm silenced her, a fear that struck through the quiet of the night. Beyond the rise a burst of hoofs sounded suddenly. Through the rank grass, ponies slashed on the run. Each instant the sounds pounded nearer, while Buckland stood unmoving, while the girl's hands dropped.

One anxious moment she gazed into Duke Buckland's haggard face; then her spurs tinkled. Her pony spurted. She swung desperately toward the shadows of trees clumped at the edge of the hollow. She swerved into them, riding with all the speed her pony could summon, and vanished in black confusion.

Stunned, struck cold, his six-gun still lifted and pointing into empty air, Duke Buckland let her go.

TENSELY Kit McCane exclaimed: "Duke! It's the posse! They're headin' this way!"

Buckland retreated, tearing his burning gaze from the spot where the girl had disappeared, turning to peer across the slope. On the crest riders came into view swiftly. Driving their horses with hard-pressed spurs, they sped toward the rim of the hollow. Dodging back, ducking low, Buckland and McCane held their sixes ready.

"That's Caldwell leadin' 'em, Duke!" the boy whispered tightly. "They're headin' the way she went!"

They crept still farther back as the posse swept past. Buckland straightened at White Man's side; he slapped his Colt into its holster. McCane mounted beside him and searched his face. Dark lines of pain etched the skin around Buckland's eyes and mouth. He spoke with a husky tightness.

"I reckon that's one promise I made myself I'll never keep, Kit!"

"Duke—I don't figger it!" McCane blurted. "I heard her say she's leader of the gang! She gave 'em orders and they did what she said! It was those same men that shot old Tom Masters down, the gang she's leadin'!"

"The same men, Kit!"

"Then she's responsible for Tom Masters' gettin' killed! The posse huntin' you for the murder she's to blame for! Gosh, Duke, you come here to help her and——"

"I know, Kit! I know!"

"Duke!" Kit McCane pressed his calico closer. "Duke, you loved that girl once, and you still love her, don't you, podner? Findin' out she's the gang leader—why, you can't clear yourself now! If they ever find out she's——"

A burst of voices carried on the wind. The crash of a gun echoed from the hills. The hoofbeats of the posse horses came to a sudden stop. Again a gun blasted; and a hoarse shout carried from the distance.

"Drop your gun! Stand where you are! Make a move and I'll drill you sure!"

In agony Duke Buckland blurted: "They've got her, Kit! They've got her!"

Buckland's swinging spurs sent White Man plunging across the slope. Trained in the ways of the owl-hoot trail, the pony sped with scarcely a sound. McCane spurted behind, snapping his gun into his hand, peering into the deep darkness beyond. Buckland led the way into the shadows of the trees, swinging along a narrow trail, striving to find in the flecked moonlight some sign of the girl.

To the far edge of the trees he raced with McCane at White Man's tail. He dragged on the reins and stopped, peering onto the open moonlight of the flat beyond. There five riders were moving on mincing horses, guns gripped in their hands. There in their midst another rider stood, face covered with a tight-drawn bandana.

The girl was circled by sixes. Buckland eased White Man forward, daring to move into the open, as angry voices carried to him. His gun and McCane's were level. Their thumbs were dragging the hammer's back. Tight-muscled they rode, eyes on the girl, hearing the sharp tones of Sheriff Caldwell.

"Im' warnin' you. Steady! We're aimin' to see the killer of Tom Masters get what's comin' to him pronto! We're goin' to take a look at your face!"

The sheriff's hand reached for the girl's mask, reached to pull it down exactly as Duke Buckland had done.

At that instant Buckland fired. His slug whined past a hatted head, and nipped at the sleeve of the sheriff. Instantly Caldwell's arm jerked back; Instantly the riders howled with surprise and whirled. Their weapons streaked in the shine of the moon as Buckland fired again, as McCane's weapon echoed his shots.

Slugs tore the wind and the members of the posse scattered. Buckland twisted White Man aside, glimpsing a quick movement of Tally Stanton. The girl jerked her horse backward, out of the broken ring of riders, and ducked low as she dug her rowells. She had no gun; at the sheriff's order she had dropped it into the grass; but she had the advantage of the sudden confusion. With grim joy Buckland fired at the men nearest her and sent them swerving away as he he wheeled White Man back to the trees.

Bullets clicked into the trunks and flicked through the leaves as Buckland dodged to the trail. McCane raced after him through a maze of blackness, and as they jerked around a bend they withheld fire. They glimpsed the posse speeding into the arm of the wood; they pressed their horses to the limit. Swift and silent as ghosts, they followed the trail until they reached a second bend; then Buckland, swerving sharply, left it to cut across a clearing and plunge toward the open beyond.

He raced upon the bare slope, McCane at his side, six ready, peering back. Within the wood he heard the pounding hoofs of the trailers. With the wind he jackrabbited across the flat, turning in the direction the girl had gone. Reaching the edge of the open space, they headed again onto a tree-shadowed trail. Riding more slowly, still alert, they wound their way deep, until a call stopped them short.

"Duke! Duke!"

BUCKLAND sat still in the saddle, sensing a movement ahead. From behind a screen of saplings at the trailside, a rider moved into view—Tally Stanton. She hurried close; impulsively her hand closed on Buckland's.

"Duke, they'll find your tracks! They'll follow you here! You've got to take cover!"

"I reckon," Buckland answered quietly. "They're lookin' for you as much as me now. It's plumb unpleasant to think of 'em grabbin' you."

"I know! Duke, follow me! I know a way, a way that no one else knows of. They'll never be able to follow. Stick close, Duke!"

The girl turned her pony and again she rode swiftly. Buckland's blue eyes were pinched as he followed. Kit McCane, jogging warily alongside, was puzzled as he studied Duke's face. The boy took a slow breath and wagged his head.

"Duke, I can't figger it!" he whispered. "The girl's gang did a killin' you're bein' blamed for, but you got her free when the law grabbed her. You might 've got grabbed yourself! There's hangin' waiting for you now, but you seem to be forgettin' it!"

"Forgettin' it, Kit?" Buckland asked quietly. "Nope. An owl-hooter like me can't ever forget there's a hangin' waitin' for him at the end of the trail. Gettin' her free, Kit—I had to do it. Knowin' Tally——"

"You're headin' into trouble, Duke—plenty!"

"I reckon. Because Tally asked me to come, Kit. Only because of that."

The girl had paused on the trail ahead. As Buckland and McCane drew alongside, she pointed to an area of saplings growing at the base of a huge outcropping of rock. She listened, to make sure no riders were following, before she urged:

"Follow me through it, Duke. There's an opening in the rock behind the saplings, and a steep slope down. Keep your pony walking slow."

She prodded her horse through the yielding saplings; Buckland and McCane followed close. Once past the thickest of them, a black cavity yawned ahead. The girl rode into it cautiously. Thicker darkness enveloped them. They rode long moments down the steep incline; and when they reached level ground, the girl drew rein.

A match flared in the hand of Duke Buckland. Around and above them rocky earth glittered in the shine. From a hollow at one side, the girl lifted a pine knot. Buckland's matches ignited it. A smoky yellow flame flared up gleaming far along the natural tunnel. Again the girl listened cautiously before she spoke.

"It leads under a corner of the Block S, Duke. I discovered it years ago; I've never told anyone about it. It's the dry bed of an underground river; it reaches straight to the bank of the Rio. There's no chance of any one following us here." Buckland was gazing anxiously at the girl. Her face was pale, her eyes worried. She did not flinch even when he said:

"Tally, there's a question I've got to ask you. I've got to know. Are you the leader of that gang?"

The girl answered softly: "Yes, Duke."

SHE turned her pony, walking it over hard, rocky ground over which an unseen stream had once flowed. His eyes gleaming with trouble in the dim light, Buckland rode at her side. She gazed at him a silent moment, as though groping for words.

"I know they're blaming you for Tom Masters' death, Duke!" she blurted. "The gang did it, killed Tom Masters, one of the kindest, finest men living. Duke, you've got to listen to me! You've got to understand!"

"Knowin' the kind of a girl you are, Tally," Buckland said quietly, "it won't be hard to understand."

The girl peered ahead, along the curve of the natural tunnel. "It goes back to before the time dad died," she said quietly as she rode. "The ranch paid well until the drought came. It was the hardest year dad ever knew. The herd was almost wiped out, and we had to restock. In order to do that, dad had to borrow money. He got it from Miles Hawkes, and gave Hawkes a mortgage on the ranch.

"The next few years were good, Duke. When the time came to pay off the mortgage, dad had the money to do it. He paid Hawkes in cash, and Hawkes turned the mortgage back to him, marked paid. It wasn't until months later that we learned Hawkes had tricked dad, that

Hawkes intended to get the Block S for his own."

Buckland listened intently to the girl's words through the echoing hoofbeats in the tunnel.

"Just how he worked it, I'm not sure. Either the mortgage paper he returned to dad was a forgery, or the one he has now is a forgery. Either way, the paper Hawkes turned back to dad disappeared from dad's desk. One of Hawkes's men must have slipped into the house one night and stolen it. Hawkes must have destroyed it. He's played his cards well, Duke.

"Months later Hawkes came to dad and demanded payment of the mortgage. Dad had already paid it in cash, but he couldn't find proof that he had. Hawkes had seen to it that he wouldn't. The only paper in existence concerning the transaction was the mortgage Hawkes held, still unpaid. He claimed it was overdue, and if dad didn't pay it up at once, we'd have to clear out of the Block S."

"But the county records ought to show that the mortgage had been paid, Tally!" Buckland protested.

"The records should have showed it," the girl agreed, "but they didn't. They didn't because Hawkes is the head of a political machine that rules the whole county. His word is law. There's scarcely a man who doesn't fear him. Hawkes gets rid of any man who crosses him. We examined the records, Duke. They all showed that the mortgage hadn't yet been paid. Hawkes had falsified them. Dad couldn't prove he'd paid, and he couldn't pay again. Hawkes ordered us off the ranch, and then it started, Duke."

Buckland's blue eyes were shining hard.

"Dad was a fighter—you know that. He refused to get off the ranch. The law was against him. Hawkes's machine was against him. We were facing heavy odds, but dad fought them. He defied Hawkes to make him get off the ranch. They became bitter enemies. War sprang out of it, Duke—ranch war—and in it dad was killed." The girl's lips trembled as she paused; she raised her chin proudly. "Killed by one of Hawkes's men, but he died on the Block S, holding it."

THEY rode on quietly a moment before the girl resumed. "Hawkes started the war. He had snipers fire into the ranch. The hands were killed or wounded. It wasn't long before they all cleared out. Rustlers cut into our herd until nothing was left of it. Hawkes men did all that. We couldn't find proof, but Hawkes was using bullets to try to drive us out.

"Dad fought fire with fire. He gathered fighters around him. We hired a man named Jake Ley to bring others in. Dad let no one know that he was forming the gang. He brought it in, and cleared off the Block S, and had the gang hold it against Hawkes's men. His one hope was to break up Hawkes's power, the political machine. He'd helped build up this country, Duke—the town is named after his father—and he fought to the last."

"I reckon," Buckland said quietly, "he'd never stop fightin'."

"Not until a bullet got him through the heart, Duke. One of Hawkes's snipers picked him off. I'd ridden at dad's side. I'd worn men's clothes. When dad died, I took his place at the head of the gang. We kept fighting Hawkes, and we forced him to give up tryin' to get the ranch. The gang's held it ever since. But now, Duke—now they're turning against me!"

Buckland's eyes narrowed.

"Jake Ley is taking the control of the gang away from me. I can shoot as fast as any of them, Duke. I'm not afraid of Ley or his men, but they're following him now. They still pretend to take orders from me, but Ley is their real leader. He's the man who's responsible for killing Tom Masters tonight. Old Tom was my best friend. They're turning on me, and now they've got the Block S for their own!"

"I reckoned it was somethin' like that, Tally," Duke Buckland said quietly. "I figgered it that way!"

"That's why I sent for you, Duke! There was no one else to turn to. The gang is too strong for me to fight alone.

I've come between two fires, Miles Hawkes and Jake Ley. Both of them are trying to run me out. They're not working together, but they're both working against me. Can't you see, Duke? Do you understand?"

"I plumb do, Tally," Duke Buckland answered. "The gang's done a low-down killin' and aimed you should take the blame. Ley's aimin' to clean you out and run the gang hisself. Hawkes—he's playin' his cards careful, you said. I reckon in this game, Tally, bullets is goin' to be trumps."

The girl peered intently into Buckland's face. Ahead of them now loomed an opening of the tunnel. They rode out into clear moonlight and stood on a sandy slope which reached to the banks of the Rio Grande. Buckland extinguished the pine knot and raised his eyes to the girl's.

"Duke, the odds are too heavy! It's almost hopeless, Duke, fighting Ley and Hawkes, too. If the law wasn't looking for you, we might stand a chance, but the cards are stacked against us. I'm so tired — tired of fighting, day and night. Duke, aren't you tired, too—of riding the owl-hoot? Aren't you?"

Buckland's lips curved bitterly. "The years on the owl-hoot are longer 'n anywhere else, Tally. It's like bein' condemned to ridin' through hell for all eternity. If I could ever turn back!"

"You can, Duke!" the girl blurted. "There must a place where Black Jack Spade will never be spotted, a place where we can live without fighting, without fearing the law. I want to find that place, Duke! I don't care what the law judges you to be. I know the kind of a man you are. I don't care, Duke! I want to ride to that place and stay there forever—with you."

DUKE BUCKLAND peered deep into the shining eyes of the girl. His throat tightened as though a noose were snagged around it. His fingers twined tensely about the butt of his Colt as Tally Stanton gazed into his tortured face.

"There ain't a place like that!" he blurted. "It ain't nowhere on earth!"

"We can hunt for it, Duke! Riding together, hunting for it — it would be better than this!"

"Tally! Me, I can't never cut off the owl-hoot now. There ain't a sheriff in the West that ain't got his loop ready for me when I show. No matter where I go, the law's right behind me, trailin'. I couldn't—I couldn't ask you to share that, Tally!"

The girl was silent, still gazing into Buckland's eyes.

"Ridin' with you, findin' a place that's peaceful—it'd be heaven itself," Buckland went on huskily. "There ain't nothin' in the world that'd make me happier, but—the law'd keep lookin' for me. No matter where we stopped, there'd be that fear——of the law comin'. Of a sheriff's six-gun. Of a hangman's noose. Tally——God——"

The girl said quietly: "Take the trail, Duke—and I'll ride with you."

"Tally, I can't let you!" Duke Buckland exclaimed in anquish. "You ain't the kind to ride the owl-hoot. You ain't the kind to saddle-mate with an outlaw like I've become. Let you trail with me? I can't!"

The girl sat silent in her saddle. Buckland's blue eyes were dark with pain. When she turned her pony, his hand reached with an aching desire to stop her, but he brought it back. Quietly she headed her pony away. Quietly she rode across the sandy slope, melting away in the darkness. And Buckland sat motionless in the saddle, watching her go.

He swung White Man abruptly. He sped in the opposite direction, and Kit McCane spurred to follow him. The cool river win beat into Buckland's hot face when he pulled to a stop miles beyond. McCane peered into his tortured eyes and said quietly:

"Were you thinkin' of me, Duke, when you said you couldn't trail with her? Thinkin' of me and not wantin' us to split?"

"I was thinkin' of her, Kit——only her!"

"It's the only thing that'd make me split with you, Duke," McCane said quietly. "I'd do it and be right glad to

see you tryin' to clear off the owl-hoot. I'd plumb miss you, podner—like almighty hell—but if you hanker to ride with Tally——"

"I can't, Kit! I can't!"

Buckland turned White Man away from the Rio. The pony walked slowly, and he peered ahead through the moonlight. At his side Kit McCane jogged. They spoke no word as they rode——rode while the moon sank low and dipped behind the hills.

Throughout the long day that followed, the secrecy of the hills covered Duke Buckland and Kit McCane. They camped in a hole in the woods not daring to light a fire, keeping out of the open. At times they heard the beating of hoofs as riders passed close, men of the posse still searching for the outlaw Spade. Vigilant, wary, they remained out of sight until the sun set and a velvety darkness curtained the sky.

Cautiously they left their hiding place and rode toward Stanton Fork. Within sight of it, Buckland waited and watched. The windows of Tally's Kitchen glowed. The girl was inside. A sentry, posted there by Miles Hawkes, sauntered near the door. Those who approached, he warned back. No one dared defy the power of Hawkes and enter. Buckland saw it occur again and again, and his eyes shone coldly.

He saw Hawkes saunter along the road and enter a shack beyond. He noticed a man wearing a star stride through the shafting lamplight, and recognized the deputy he had imprisoned in the abandoned shack in the hills. The man had managed to break away and had returned to town. Riders came and went, members of the posse reporting to the sheriff. Now and then a few words carried on the wind to Buckland's ears.

"Watchin' every trail—he ain't rid out—he's still hidin' somewhere around here."

"We'll find that skunk Spade and string him up!"

The town grew quieter as several hours passed. Buckland became alert when the lights of Tally's Kitchen were extinguished. He eased closer, with Kit McCane at his side, and saw the girl leave the restaurant. She mounted her pony and rode quickly out of town. Buckland, keeping to the grass, followed her.

She kept to the road, jogging toward the desolate Block S. Before she reached it, she turned off. Buckland kept far back on the trail, and saw her ease into a clearing. Pulling rein, he waited. Long moments passed before he discerned another movement. When she reappeared, she was wearing man's clothing; her face was masked. Once in the saddle, she rode on quickly, and Buckland anxiously pressed after her.

She sped across the bed of a valley; turned into a rocky flat strewn with shale and massed boulders. When she stopped, she was at the base of a stack of rock that rose to form a table in the midst of the flat. Buckland saw her leave the saddle and climb the rocks. He saw her reach the table top, move on, and disappear.

He signaled McCane to follow, and rounded the jagged formation. He searched the juts and clefts, and began to climb. McCane mounted with him, and as they ascended, they heard voices. The voices were gruff, husky. There were men on the rock, talking in hushed tones, as if planning a new move. Buckland paused near McCane.

"The gang's meetin', Kit," he said quietly. "Tally's headin' into trouble. They're plumb cultus jaspers."

"I'm with you, Duke!" McCane answered tensely. "Steady, podner!"

The wall was sheer at the edge of the table top, but Buckland found footholds. He raised to gaze across the flat surface of the rock. The light of the moon, gleaming again above the hills, shadowed the figures of men grouped yards away. Their faces were masked. Their voices ceased abruptly as footfalls sounded beyond.

They turned quickly. They faced the figure approaching their circle. Their hands moved to the butt of their guns. One of them stepped forward, his bearing confident and defiant, to face the newcomer. Buckland recognized the slight

figure, the bright eyes shining above the edge of the bandana mask.

Tally Stanton. She paused, facing men who were killers. There was silence as Duke Buckland watched.

THE girl spoke in the low tone that Buckland had heard her use in the hollow the night previous. Her gaze passed from masked face to masked face. Her words carried an imperative ring.

"I told you men to go to the ranch and stay there. I never called this meetin'. What're you doin' here? No matter why you come, you're headin' back pronto!"

The man who had stepped forward towered over her. Buckland saw his lips curl in a sneer. His answer expressed the defiance of his stare.

"You're orderin' us, are you? Nope, you ain't! We're through takin' orders from you. We're through takin' orders from—a girl."

Tally Stanton stiffened. "Ley, you'll do as I tell you! Head back for the ranch! Stay there and keep under cover! You rode without orders from me last night when you shot down poor Tom Masters, but tonight——"

"Tonight we're ridin' again, no matter what you order!" Jake Ley snapped. "You ain't leadin' this gang any more. I'm leadin' it. These men are takin' orders from me!"

The girl's eyes flashed. Her voice rang more sharply. "Men, you heard my orders! Your job's to hold the Block S from Hawkes, and nothing else. Head back to it right now!"

No man moved. A coarse laugh broke from the lips of Jake Ley. Buckland peered intently at the man's masked features and his face grew icy. The girl held her ground, but a new anxiety shone in her eyes.

"You turn on me, Ley, but you wouldn't dare turn on a man your equal!"

Ley laughed again, but he suddenly broke off, stepping closer to the girl, his shoulders hunched threateningly. "I ain't takin' any loose talk from you! I'm rulin' this roost now! These men are followin' me, and we're keepin' the Block S for our own. We reckon we've found us a fine layout, and we're aimin' to make the most of it!

"Sure we drilled Tom Masters, the same as we're goin' to drill every lawman in the county! We're goin' to clean 'em out proper. We'll pin those badges on our own men. Hawkes thinks he's runnin' this county, does he? He'll soon find out I am! We're aimin' to cash in!"

The girl stood in cold fury, peering into the piggish eyes of Jake Ley.

"That tunnel runnin' under the Block S—I've found out about it. I know where it comes up and where it leads to. It's made to order for runnin' cattle over the border, and that's what we're goin' to use it for. We're goin' to cut in plenty on every herd in the valley, and anybody tryin' to stop us'll get drilled. Anybody ——includin' you!"

Still the girl did not speak. Mutinous eyes peered at her. Jake Ley's right hand was snagged about the butt of his Colt. She faced concerted defiance, men to whom the taking of human life meant nothing. She faced death from the gun of Jake Ley.

Duke Buckland rose quietly. He whispered to McCane: "Stay out of sight, Kit! Keep watchin' Tally!" He straightened on the edge of the table rock. He stood in the open, peering at Ley, hands empty.

LEY turned his back on Tally Stanton with deliberate insolence. He spoke gruffly to the band of masked riders.

"Men, start headin' for town. Circle it and keep out of sight and watch sharp. The stage from Tulosa'll be runnin' in pronto. Like I already told you, that stage is carryin' plenty of dinero from the Tulosa Bank. I'll be watchin' for it to stop. I'll signal with three quick shots. When you hear 'em——"

Ley's glittering glance went to the girl's whitened face, and he laughed again.

"When you hear 'em," he repeated, "close in. Drill the hombres around that stage and grab the strong-box. Hightail it to the place I told you. We'll split that money even. Anybody that tries to stop us, give 'em a slug in the heart. Git

down to your horses! Start ridin' for town right now!"

Duke Buckland began a slow, steady walk toward the leader of the killer gang.

The click of his heels on the rock turned glittering eyes quickly toward him. The masked men whirled, Colts snapping into their hands and leveling. Jake Ley twisted, with six-gun steadied at his hip. Tally Stanton pulled down her mask. She raised her hand in a gesture of warning when she glimpsed Buckland, but he did not pause.

He did not pause until he came close to Jake Ley. The moonlight was full on his face. Ley's eyes widened and hardened upon it. They stood face to face a moment, while the guns of the others trained on Buckland, while Tally Stanton gazed at him in silent anguish, while Kit McCane watched tensely from the edge of the table rock.

"Jake Ley," Duke Buckland said quietly. "Your name ain't Ley. I seem to recollect it's Butch Yace."

The narrow-set eyes of the gang leader took on a harder glitter.

"Butch Yace," Buckland repeated. "Killer. You've got eyes I'll never forget. I'll never forget 'em starin' at me from the dark, behind the sights of a rifle, the time you tried to drill me in the back."

The eyes of Butch Yace stared evilly now.

"I reckon you recollect that, Yace. I promised myself then I'd pay you back for it. I've been lookin' to cross your trail again some day. It was years ago, Yace. Maybe you remember that time when you tried to collect the rewards for Black Jack Spade."

The silence was taut. Duke Buckland raised his hands very slowly. Guns jerked threateningly; but he lifted from his vest pocket a pack of old cards. He fingered through them, separated one, and held it out. The moonlight shone on its face—the Jack of Spades.

"Take it, Yace! Keep it! Remember the promise I made! You'll die with that card on your carcass—if you ain't too yellow to take it!"

Yace's lips curled in a sneer. He snatched the card from Duke Buckland's hand. With insolent confidence he slid it into the pocket of his shirt. Above his mask his eyes shone low-lidded, threatening.

"I'm takin' it, Spade—as a challenge. I'm takin' it—and I'm talkin' back right now—with slugs!"

The gun at Yace's hip streaked fire.

DUKE BUCKLAND sprang when his Keen eyes saw Yace avert his glance toward the girl. Duke's hand flashed Coltward and gun metal streaked. Yace fired, the bullet whining past Duke as his own weapon came level. He stroked the hammer for the first swift shot, and at that instant the hand of a masked man at his side swung to jar his arm.

Buckland's bullet spanged against rock as Yace fired again. He leaped back, weaving from side to side as the gang riders scattered, as Tally Stanton cried Buckland's name. The blast of Yace's gun was echoed by the sixes of the men near him. Across the table rock, slugs screamed—a fusillade ripping the air at Duke Buckland.

The murderous ferocity of the attack drove him backward. He sprang near the edge of the rock as a bullet tore into his flesh. The power of it spun him around. The night world whirled as he sprawled. His hands clutched desperately at loose rock as he rolled. He spilled into darkness, off the table top, against sharp crags that shocked agony through him as he fell.

The roaring of guns echoed in his ears as he jarred to a stop on a ledge. A delirium of pain spun his mind, and through it, he heard running footfalls. A sharp cry—"Duke!" reached him, and a ringing command in the voice of "Butch" Yace. He strode to rise, but the shock of his wound sapped his strength. Through the dimness of his mind penetrated the drumming of hoofbeats on the ground below.

"Duke!"

The call was Kit McCane's, and it brought a groaning response from Duke

Buckland. He heard the sounds of some one climbing across the rock toward him. He heard a girl's voice speaking anxiously. Farther away, the drumming of the hoofbeats continued. A hand tugged at him; he drew himself up with torturing effort.

"Duke!" Kit McCane's voice rang again. "Your're hit, Duke!"

Buckland gasped: "Tally! Kit, where's Tally?"

"Here, Duke!" The girl's voice turned Buckland's bleared gaze. It was her hand that was steadying him, helping him rise. "Kit kept them away from me, Duke! They cleared out. They're riding toward town now, Duke! Your arm!"

Buckland dragged at his left arm. Torture was throbbing through it. Blood was trickling to his fingers. His attempt to move them failed. He brought himself to his knees, to his feet, as the cool wind cleared his brain. He found his right hand still clutching his Cole; and his fingers on it tightened.

"Tally—Tally, listen! Head back to town. Keep out of anything that might happen. You're through with the gang. You never headed 'em—understand? You've got to leave it to me!"

"Duke, you can't!" the girl exclaimed. "You're hurt! You've got to get away—across the Line!"

"Kit!" Buckland broke in. "Stick with me, Kit!"

He moved across the ledge, swaying. He groped for footholds and lowered himself. Anxiously Kit McCane climbed down with him. The girl came to Buckland's side when they reached the flat ground. Her eyes glistened with tears as she watched him climb into the saddle, knowing that nothing she could say would stop him. He spun White Man and blurted huskily:

"With me, Kit! We're ridin'!"

Vibrant horseflesh carried Buckland away. The girl gazed after him. She watched until he swung, with McCane at his side, out of sight among the rocks. He could not hear the cry that rose unconsciously to her lips.

"Duke! Duke!"

BUCKLAND pulled rein sharply. He stopped on the slope behind Stanton Fork and peered into the town. It was quiet. Only a few lights gleamed from the grimy windows. Only a few horses were tethered at the racks. Buckland's gaze dropped to his useless left hand, and he lifted his Colt toward McCane.

"Reload it, Kit! Fill 'er! Quick!"

McCane gripped the gun. "Duke, you're playin' losin' odds! You've taken cards that are stacked against you!" He clicked cartridges into the cylinder. "You're fightin' a whole gang, Duke, and every man of 'em's a killer!"

"Hurry it, Kit!" Buckland was leaning forward, peering intently. "Down there behind the shacks. See that rider? He's one of the gang. He's waitin' for the stage to roll in. Over there, Kit. There's another. They're surroundin' the town. Kit, we're ridin' in. Are you with me?"

McCane swung the cylinder of Buckland's gun into place. He pressed its butt into Buckland's hand.

"I'm with you, Duke!"

"Then ride!"

Buckland swung White Man sharply. He cut back across the slope, and farther from town turned down to the road. He watched sharply to avoid the gang riders posted in the shadows; he kept his hand on his Colt. He jogged more slowly as he came into the light of Stanton Fork. McCane rode at his side. Their eyes shifted alertly right and left. They drifted to the center of the town.

Buckland's gaze went to the shack into which he had seen Miles Hawkes go earlier that evening. Its windows were shining with lamplight. A shadow blackened its pane and vanished. Buckland slipped down. At his word McCane followed. They eased along the sidewalk; and at the door of the shack they paused.

"Stand watch, Kit!"

McCane's face went white. His haggard eyes followed the move of Buckland's hand to the latch of the door. He stepped back against the wall, breathing hotly, as Buckland paused. His eyes searched the road up and down as they stood motionless one moment.

Then Buckland stepped forward, a quick, sure stride that carried him through the door.

Miles Hawkes jerked around as Buckland stepped aside and closed the way behind him. Hawkes's heavy face hardened and his hands lifted from papers on his desk. Slowly he came to his feet, his fingers tensing for a quick draw. Duke Buckland stood with hands at his side, his level gaze on Hawkes's eyes.

The big man blurted: "You're—— Spade!"

"I'm Spade, Mr. Hawkes," Duke Buckland said. "I'm Spade, and I come to do business."

Hawkes's gunhand darted. His Colt leaped in the light. It was half out of its holster before Buckland's fingers snapped. Buckland's six streaked level. Lamplight glinted a warning along its barrel, a warning that froze Miles Hawkes, brought Hawkes's gun motionless and pointing at the floor.

BUCKLAND ordered: "Drop it!"

Hawkes straightened. His face twisted evilly as he lowered the gun to the top of his desk. Buckland's eyes glanced quickly around the office and paused an instant on a safe sitting in the rear corner. Listening alertly, he kept his position near the door, his gun never wavering.

"You're leavin' town soon, Spade," Miles Hawkes said heavily. "Leavin' it on the way to boot hill!"

"Maybe," Buckland said. "There's a boot hill somewheres that I'll get planted in. Maybe it'll be this one, maybe it'll be tonight. But before I start that trip, Hawkes, you 'n' me are talkin' turkey."

"If you've got business here, it's with a lynchin' party!"

"I said—maybe," Buckland retorted. "Keep your voice down, Hawkes. Be careful of the moves you make. Step over to that safe and open it. Don't play for time, because if anybody starts comin' in here, I'll drill you. You savvy, Hawkes! Open that safe!"

Hawkes glared defiance; but the leveled gun in Buckland's hands brooked no argument. He took slow steps toward the safe. He crouched before it. He twisted the dial. Buckland watched him alertly, his ears straining to hear sounds in the distance, while Hawkes pulled the steel door open. He said, then, sharply:

"In there, Hawkes, you've got a paper havin' to do with the Block S. I want it!"

Hawkes's face turned a wrathful red. "It ain't here!" he blurted. "I ain't got——"

"Take it out of that safe, Hawkes!" Buckland commanded. "Take it out—— careful! You're reachin' for a paper, not a gun. You're findin' it without any trouble. You're doin' that, Hawkes, or I'm doin' it over your carcass!"

Again the glittering gun in Buckland's hand enforced the command. He watched Hawkes's hand sharply as it reached into the safe. He stepped forward as Hawkes straightened with a paper. His order turned Hawkes to the desk, forced him into a chair. He bent above Hawkes's shoulder, gun pressing, peering at the document in the lamplight.

"It wouldn't 've been healthy for you to make a mistake," he said quietly. "You've got pen and ink right handy. Write on that paper. Mark it paid, and sign your name."

Hawkes tightened. "You can't force ——"

"Write!"

The sting of Buckland's voice jerked Hawkes's hand toward the pen. He took it up and dipped it. He scrawled across the face of the paper. Buckland's eyes followed each stroke of the pen. He straightened, backing away, his eyes shining deep blue.

"Bring it to the door, Hawkes. I'm goin' out, and you're handin' it through. You're goin' to stay in here and keep quiet. If you don't——"

The gun glittered its warning. Buckland backed to the door and Hawkes followed. Buckland slipped through it, and Kit McCane stepped close. McCane snatched the folded paper from Hawkes's hand. McCane pulled the door shut. Buckland warned again:

"Stay there!"

His glance shot down the road, into the depths of the night. From far around

the bend echoed the rattle of running hoofs. Through the quiet came the clatter of spinning wheels. Buckland's lips thinned as he heard the sounds. Kit McCane, facing Hawkes's door with leveled gun, blurted:

"The stage is comin' in!"

BUCKLAND turned away. "Watch that door, Kit! If Hawkes starts comin' out, make him come a-shootin'!"

He whirled and ran along the sidewalk. He slowed when he reached the spot where old Tom Masters had died. The door of the sheriff's shack was closed. Lamplight was gleaming through the windows. Noiselessly Buckland raised the latch and tensed. Suddenly, muscles springing, he stepped through.

He whirled to face the corner, to face the lean man at the old roll-top desk. The glint of the light on Buckland's Colt jerked Sheriff Caldwell half out of his chair. His hand reached toward the holstered gun lying on the desk—and stopped.

Buckland's "Easy!" stopped it.

Caldwell straightened. A tight smile curved his lips. In a level voice he said: "You're Spade."

"I'm that gent!" Buckland admitted. "I'm talkin' fast! You're listening to what——"

"They're men in the hills lookin' for you, Spade," Caldwell said tightly. "Every trail is bein' watched. There ain't any way you can——"

"You're listenin'!" Buckland cut in. "You've been trailin' me as the gang leader, sheriff. You've been wantin' me for killin' Tom Masters. I'm tellin' you I've been leadin' the gang——but killin' Masters is somethin' I never done. I'm tellin' you that because——"

"It ain't savin' you any, Spade," Caldwell cut in quietly. "Maybe you didn't kill Tom, but you're wanted for plenty else that'll get you strung up. Tellin' me you didn't kill him don't——"

"I never expected you to believe me, sheriff," Buckland declared quickly. "You're right—it don't matter so far as hangin' me goes. I ain't the kind of a gent who'd kill an old man. That's what I'm tellin' you. Listen! The gang's ridin' tonight. They're posted around this town right now. They're aimin'——"

The hoofbeats were louder now. The stage was running close toward the town. The clattering noise caused Buckland to back toward the door.

"They're aimin' to stick up that stage! They'll drill every man around it to get the money if you don't stop 'em! Get out there, sheriff! Call out your men! In another minute——"

Buckland jerked the door open. His quick glance showed him the coach rolling into the lights of the town, horses laboring, dust clouding behind it. The driver was bearing back on the reins. The spinning wheels began to slow.

"Call 'em, sheriff! Get to that stage before——"

Three quick shots blasted out of the darkness. The reports thundered from a point behind the buildings. They jarred echoes out of the hills. Three quick shots that stirred a confusion of hoofbeats out of the night as hidden masked riders spurred toward the light.

The signal.

BUCKLAND sprang through the doorway as the stage stopped, while the pounding hoofbeats behind the shacks rolled like threatening thunder. He slipped along the front of the sheriff's shack and darted into a narow passage. From it he peered to see riders appearing in the light of the town, riders who sprang into the open from their hiding places, guns bared, faces masked.

Bullets flamed from the guns of the masked riders. Slugs whined down the street and clicked into the body of the coach. On its seat the shotgun messenger jerked up, turning his sawed-off weapon upon horsemen who swerved close. The gun blasted twice before the messenger leaped down, seeking shelter to reload, and into its thumping echo the strident voice of Sheriff Caldwell shouted.

"Keep 'em away! Get at 'em! Drop those coyotes!"

Buckland saw him spring toward the coach, and his gun flashed twice. Dust swelled in thick clouds from the hoofs

of the gang riders' horses as guns barked again and doors slapped open. Into the dimmed light men ran, guns in their hands, rushing toward the point of attack. Hoarse shouts sounded as the riders swung down upon the coach, circling to cut off the men on foot, barring the way with hot lead.

Duke Buckland dodged into the open. Through the thickening dust, he glimpsed the shotgun messenger dropped to his knees, raising his weapon to fire again. Buckland saw red splotch his face, saw him slump. On the seat of the coach, the driver sprawled, drilled through the chest, staring with sightless eyes at flashing guns. From points of shelter along the road, townsmen answered the attack while the masked men raked the street with their bullets. Buckland sprang through the shadows, toward the door at which he had left Kit McCane.

The boy was crowded back, face white, keeping his post. Buckland, nearing him, saw a dark movement against the side of the shack. Through the darkness a man was creeping, from the rear. A shine of light behind the structure disclosed that a back door was open. The man who had left it was easing forward, gun in hand. Miles Hawkes!

He sprang past the corner and whirled to fire at Kit McCane. Buckland's six-gun roared. It sent a bullet close by Hawkes's ear. The big man lurched aside, twisting in surprise, swinging his gun. Buckland stopped, straddled, and his voice rang sharply through the blasting of the gang riders' guns.

"Try it, Hawkes!"

Hawkes fired. His gun spat flame and Buckland leaped. Deliberately Buckland withheld his bullets. He dropped to a crouch, as Hawkes's thumb raked the hammer again. His eyes were blue ice, his lips a thin line, as fire and lead poured from his Coult. He stood without moving, gun now silenced, gaze hard on the face of Hawkes.

The big man clawed the air and tottered. His gun drove a slug into the ground. He sprawled in the dust, his gun flying from his fingers. He struck and lay still.

"DUKE — back!" Kit McCane shouted the warning as he sprang past the corner of the shack. Buckland whirled to his side. They dropped into the shadows as bullets streamed through the air at the spot where they stood, bullets from the masked riders' guns. They peered through blinding dust at darting shadow forms around the embattled coach.

On the sidewalk two townsmen lay, dropped by the gangriders' sixes. Against the wall the sheriff was backed, teeth bared with the agony of a wound in his thigh, blasting his Colt at the riding killers. Two of the stage horses were fallen in their harness. Around the coach the masked men circled, whipping slugs at every moving mark, shooting to kill.

Suddenly a hoarse shout sent them scattering. They wheeled and herded toward the open. Leading them, Buckland glimpsed the rider whose command had ended the battle. His right hand was lashing his gun right and left at townsmen crouched along the road. His other was gripping the handle of an iron-banded box. Behind him his riders crowded, firing back, as he sped into the darkness of the open.

"It's Yace, Duke!" McCane blurted. "He's got the stage chest!"

Buckland strode swiftly out of the shadow as the speeding horses of the masked riders passed the last shack. Through choking dust he groped to White Man. He sprang into the saddle as Kit McCane followed. Together they whirled the way the gang riders had gone. Their rowels pressed hard as Buckland twisted back——back to see men springing for their horses, to hear the bellow of Sheriff Caldwell's voice.

"That's Spade! Get Spade!"

Buckland's spurs sent White Man streaking like the wind. He bent low, face twisted with the pain of his wounded arm, as he shifted off the road. The sharp reports of guns sounded behind; slugs whined sharply overhead. He

leaped across the drywash with McCane racing with him; but he did not answer the posse bullets. Through the glow of the moon, he kept his pony speeding at its limit, watching the road behind.

The posse kept to it. Buckland did not diminish speed as he swung across the slope. He raised to peer into the silvered distance, to listen to the sounds carrying on the wind. He sighted a stretch of the road twining into the hills and strained to see any hovering dust.

"It's clear up there, Kit! The gang's cut off the road. Stick close!"

He swung across a shallow valley and raced across the crest. He pulled rein suddenly and McCane slowed beside him. The boy heard nothing, yet Buckland detected a faint rhythm beating through the air. The distance was baffling blackness to McCane, but Buckland sensed black movements far ahead. He raised in the saddle again, and again his spurs dug hard.

"They're scatterin'!"

Suddenly, when he reached the floor of the next valley, he pulled up sharp. His sibilant warning brought McCane to a startled standstill. Motionless they sat in the saddle while Buckland peered across the grassy slope. They waited tensely, waited while a rider sped through the moonlight, toward the spot where their horses stood.

Abruptly the rider stopped. He became a statue in the moonlight, peering at the shadow figures that were Buckland and McCane. His six-gun glinted level. He kept his left hand gripped on the handle of the box he was carrying. His very stillness was a threat, a threat that Buckland defied.

He sent White Man walking forward slowly. His gaze was steady and hard. He left his six-gun in its holster, his right hand loose at his side. He pulled rein and stopped; and still Butch Yace had not moved. The gun in his hand trained full on Buckland, bright in the moonlight, its hammer back.

Quietly Buckland said: "I made you a promise, Yace."

"Don't move, Spade!"

"I'm keepin' that promise——*now!*"

Yace's hammer fell. The blast of his gun shocked into the roar of Duke Buckland's. They tore the air as one report, and powder smoke drifted on the wind from the bores of both guns.

Slipped aside in his saddle, Buckland froze, weapon poised, peering at the silvered figure of Yace. A sharp breath broke from Yace's lips. His left hand loosened; the strong-box dropped. He slumped in the leather and spilled. Buckland's gaze dropped with him, glittering bright.

Buckland swung down. He stood and peered into the upturned face of Yace. He holstered his hot gun and reached for the pocket of Yace's shirt. He lifted a playing card from it and held it in the moonlight.

The jack of spades was punctured, squarely through the center, by the bullet that had pierced Yace's heart.

A RATTLE of hoofbeats beyond the hill turned Buckland quickly to White Man. He pulled into the saddle as Kit McCane jogged close. They whirled away, cutting across the slope, as riders appeared against the sky. Quickly they shifted into the shadow of a clump of scrub oak—and watched.

"Duke!" McCane blurted anxiously. "Duke, you're hit hard! You've got to get your arm doctored, Duke!"

"I reckon—I'm all right, Kit." Buckland's voice grated with fatigue. "That paper you took from Hawkes—I want it, Kit." His fingers closed tightly on it as McCane thrust it at him. "I reckon all debts—are paid in full!"

"Easy, Duke!" McCane cautioned. "Those riders are headin' this way!"

Three men were pounding down the hill, speeding toward Stanton Fork. Buckland and McCane remained motionless in the shadow as they swung near. They rode without slowing, cutting into the valley, forcing their mounts. Buckland watched them until they swung from sight, until the pounding of hoofs beat far into the distance.

"Must be the gents Caldwell spoke of guardin' the trails," Buckland said wearily. "Warned in to help trail the

gang. They'll find Yace and the box. They'll find those jaspers. The way's open now, Kit. We've got to ride!"

They rode. Across silvered valleys, over rocky flats, toward the mounting blackness of the buttes they sought their way, constantly vigilant. They paused when they neared Gilford Pass, and listened. There was no sound save the sighing of the wind past the crags. The moonlight lay clear on the trail reaching across the boundary line. They spurred ahead, still cautious, still searching the night until they emerged on the mesa that spread beyond.

"Duke!"

The call startled Buckland and stopped him. He twisted to see a rider spurt from a shelter in the rock wall. His hand instinctively snapped to his gun; but there it paused. A slow smile formed on his lips as the rider drew near him, and he spoke softly.

"Tally—I reckon you guessed we'd be headin' out."

"Duke!" The girl's hand reached to Buckland's and closed on it warmly. "I came straight here. I had to see you, Duke. You're hurt! You can't go on."

"Gosh, I've got to keep ridin', Tally," Buckland said quietly. "Gettin' hurt a title—that can't stop me. This——this here is a paper all signed by Miles Hawkes, and I reckon it gives the Block S back to you. You don't need to expect trouble from the gang any more——or from Hawkes."

The girl took the paper slowly. "Duke, it means everything to me to get dad's ranch back again. I can't thank you for all you've done, but you've made it so much worse for yourself, Duke! The sheriff'll be hunting you. They'll keep blaming you for leading the gang and killing Tom Masters, for things you never did. It isn't fair, Duke. It isn't fair!"

"Shucks, I reckon that don't matter, Tally," Buckland said. "One noose is all they can ever put around my neck, and that one was waitin' for me before. They can't never know you led the gang at first, Tally—never!"

The girl's hand clung more tightly to Buckland's . "Duke, I've got to go back. I've got to build up the Block S again. I've got to work hard for a long time. But sometime, Duke—sometime, I'm going to trail after you. I'm going to trail you until I find you. It's a promise, Duke—a promise!"

The words echoed hauntingly in Duke Buckland's ears as he rode the dark trail with Kit McCane, long after he had seen Tally Stanton ride back through the pass, long after his eyes had taken the last glimpse of her in the night. Without speaking, they rode while the moon dipped low and the first flush of dawn came into the eastern sky.

"Duke, podner," Kit McCane sighed as they stopped their ponies to rest, "we plumb run into plenty of trouble back there. Plumb plenty!"

"I reckon," Buckland said. "She asked me to come, and I did. That's all."

In the gloom a weird note sounded, a dismal tone that haunted the trail they must follow to its inglorious end——the hoot of an owl.

February Roundup of WESTERN TRAILS

COLT QUEEN
"Duke Buckland" Novel
By Frederick C. Davis

DOUBLE-BARRELED DECOY
"Bert Little" Novel
By Clyde A. Warden

And a tophand string of other novelets and shorts by your favorite Western writers

February WESTERN TRAILS Out December 29th

Hellion's Law

Behind Sheridan men poured from the courthouse.

CHAPTER I

Due to be Hanged

As blistering a hell-hole of lawlessness as the whole of Oregon could boast was the little frontier town of Bear Paw. The magic cry of gold had brought the scummy backwash of the gold rush of '49 flowing within its borders. The grim-eyed men of dangerous, outcast trails found in the town a haven.

Gunfire rocked its dusty, winding street as regularly as the setting of the sun, and a man who walked abroad at night knew that he might never see the dawn. Then over the tortuous Oregon Trail came trekking painfully the solid, steady men who were seeking homes—men who were engulfed in the seething tide of viciousness.

Gunhawk Action Novelet

By ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

Stub Sheridan fell in a crash of gunfire. He was packing loot that blazed the trail to a cottonwood gallows. Instead of the hangman's noose, he was roped into the marshal's job. In the Six Bullets Saloon—the devil-greased hub of Bear Paw—the gross, bulbous Jade Callison made it plain to Stub that marshaling in this law's-end town got a man one of two things—money or a grave. The Kid was out to cross them all, to slope out with his pockets lined with wealth. But he hadn't figured flame-haired Sally Flynn in his scheme, nor that wild morning at the Six Bullets when hell tore loose its hinges.

In a way, when the bank was robbed, it was a common occurrence, and in a way it was not. The deed was ordinary enough, for the bank was considered an unpardonable affectation on the part of the town's honest element, but the man who performed it was not.

He rode in from the west on a gray gelding, waved cheerfully to certain men who recognized him, and dismounted casually in front of the bank. He had appeared exceptionally small in the saddle, and when he was afoot, it could be seen that he was not over five feet seven inches in height, though his shoulders were broader than most. It was the ease with which the man walked which seized attention immediately.

Such little energy did he expend and so perfectly co-ordinated were his movements that he seemed actually to drift across the board walk and through the open door. The impression instantly given was that the man was a walking lie, and that embedded in his carelessly functioning muscles was an extraordinary amount of latent energy and power.

While two horses tethered at the hitch-rack had told him that customers were within, the fact apparently did not disturb him. His smile, indeed, which revealed two even rows of clean white teeth, indicated that, like an actor, he appreciated an audience.

Some half dozen paces within the room he halted, like the gradual slowing of a rolling ball of iron, and lazily drew a single-action Colt from its tied-down holster.

"Gents," he stated calmly, "yo're goin' to be robbed, and less'n yuh want to be drilled on top of it, yuh'll play it safe."

There was a certain look of reckless daring in his smiling brown eyes which commanded respect and obedience no less than the even quality of his low-pitched voice. In the dimness of the interior he loomed larger than he actually was, and the threat his words conveyed was clearly mirrored in the graceful readiness of his carriage.

NO one spoke. A man doing business at the cashier's window was seized with a fit of choking; he sputtered ludicrously with his hands cautiously elevated. Another man, portly and gray-haired, appeared in the doorway of an inner room, stood there with his mouth sagging open. The cashier, a lean, squinting little man with a stiff white collar, glared balefully from behind his wicket; his carefully placed hands suggested that he was about to strike a chord on the wooden counter before him.

The bandit drifted on across the room, his gun appearing equally dangerous to each of the three men.

"Everything," he suggested amiably. "Paper and gold both."

Reluctantly the glaring little cashier piled a heap of bank notes and gold coins on the counter.

"Got a bag?" asked the bandit in a husky purr.

"No bags," snapped the cashier spitefully. "We don't use—"

"Git one!"

The white-collared little man jumped as if a spring inside him had unwound suddenly. Two canvas sacks materialized with the speed of a sleight-of-hand performance, and without waiting for further instructions, the cashier began to stuff the loot into them. Concluding the operation, he caught the cool but smiling eye of the robber and hastily added another handful of bills from under the counter.

With the two bags in his left hand, the bandit backed toward the door. Reaching it safely, he grinned and said: "Boys, it's a pleasure tuh play a hand with gentlemen. There wasn't none of yuh got fired up an' lost yore shirt bettin' a busted flush against six cold aces."

Then with incredible speed, he whirled and was gone. The cashier emitted a wrathful howl and snatched up a gun. The lead slashed through the empty doorway. Vaulting from behind his cage, he raced for the open, firing vainly.

He was the first of the three men to reach the street. Consequently, he was the only one of the three who witnessed what occurred there. The graceful, broad-shouldered bandit had gained the saddle of his gray mount in a flying leap. He was speeding westward down the street in a swirling flurry of dust. His get-away was clean, certain.

Then from the doorway of a restaurant flew a wind-whipped skirt of gingham. There was a bright flash of reddish hair in the hot sunlight, and a girl had darted down into the path of the racing horse.

Decision must have been instantaneous with the bandit. The powerful gray surged back on its haunches, reared high in the air, its forelegs pawing wildly.

Still triggering with blind abandon, the squinting cashier pulled his gun down level. The gelding's back arched in a spasm of movement, its head went down and it crumpled over in a somersault. A stirrup caught, and the rider was pinned beneath it.

Voices began to clamor in the quiet air. Men were running, ploughing through the ankle-deep dust. Cramming fresh shells into his weapon, the cashier went running awkwardly toward the fallen man. "Kill him," he was shouting. "Finish him off!"

The fall had struck the bandit unconscious. He lay with his handsome face exposed, and even in repose there was a striking devil-may-care recklessness stamped plainly upon it. The cashier reached him first and thrust the muzzle of his gun against the man's temple.

But he had no time to fire. He was hit by a wrathful, wiry, gingham tornado which boasted the unusual phenomenon of a crimson crest. The girl bowled into him with all of her hard-muscled little weight, causing the bullet to bore into the dirt and the cashier himself to fly backward. Dazed and blinking, he regarded the girl stupidly from a sitting position.

"You miserable little killer," she said to him shrilly. "Why didn't you draw against him when he was in the bank?"

Other men were striding up. Among them was a tall, great-chested individual with a full iron-gray beard. There was a short denim apron tied about his waist. Christopher Flynn, storekeeper, was one of the honest powers engulfed in the lawlessness of Bear Paw.

"Ye done right, Sally," he boomed. "We want no wanton killing here." Though his speech was clear, there was a rich Irish flavor to it. "Take hold, one o' ye huskies. We'll cart this bank-robbing hellion to the jail where he'll do no more harm."

A man at the back of the gathered crowd laughed hoarsely. "Much good that'll do. What with the sheriff a hundred miles away, an' no marshal here able to keep hisself above ground."

"STUB" SHERIDAN came to his senses lying face down on the floor of the single room which constituted the Bear Paw jail. He sat up ruefully in the hazy dimness, and then grinned when he discovered that a throbbing lump on his head was the only injury which bore testimony to his downfall. He was lucky, he knew, not to have a bullet in him, but he accepted the fact with a certain fatalistic unconcern. And had the result of his venture been otherwise, he would have been no more strongly moved.

Stub Sheridan, at twenty-five, was one of those strange products of the frontier. He had grown out of a time when new creeds were forged in the smoke of individual battle, when men wagered their lives—either for right or for wrong—against the endurance of their mounts, the quickness of their gunhands, or against the stoutness of their homesteads.

It was a time when courage, fearlessness, speed were the watchwords which determined a man's standing and the length of his life. There were no laws but the law of the strong. Many good men followed the outlaw trail at one time or another, and many outlaws later became leading citizens of their communities. When outlaws were caught, they were punished, not so much for the deed, but for having been apprehended at an unfortunate time in their lives.

It was not strange that a man like Sheridan, caught up in that racing flood of turbulence and action, should plunge along in it with the full vigor of his singular personality. He could no more have settled down to a routine existence than he could have backed away from a dangerous situation once it confronted him. Nor was it strange that he should possess what might be considered a warped code of ethics.

In his life he had been shown no leniency; he had learned that to give quarter was dangerous. He did what he wanted to do, and he despised men who were too weak or too afraid to do likewise.

And now that he was caught, he accepted it philosophically. He was not yet hanged, and that made a great deal of difference. Indeed, he was not a little puzzled that punishment had not already been meted out to him. Cases such as his were ordinarily dealt with in speedy and summary fashion.

With darkness he was brought a scanty meal, though his jailor refused to answer questions. Crude as the jail was, Sheridan found that it was stout enough to withstand any immediate plan of escape. Indifferently, he slept soundly on the hard floor.

He was awake with the dawn, but no one appeared until nearly ten o'clock. It was not his breakfast even then, but a sullen, unshaven individual who lounged up to the opening in the door.

"Yore name Sheridan?"

"Reckon so."

"Stub Sheridan?"

"Friend," grinned the prisoner, "yuh've got it."

"The hell yuh are. What I've heard o' him, he ain't no pint-sized runt."

The prisoner chuckled. "Folks has been fooled before. You look healthy. Open this door and find out."

WITHOUT replying, the man left. An hour later he was back, carrying two cocked guns. The jailor unlocked the door.

"Come along, son," the unshaven one ordered. "I ain't afraid of what a gun'll do, so step careful. Council wants to make talk with yuh."

The town council of Bear Paw was assembled in an abandoned saloon, half-gutted by fire, which had been rechristened as the courthouse. The council was a much-harried and thus far useless body of men which comprised Bear Paw's honest leaders. While considerably outnumbered, they were making a determined if futile effort to bring order out of lawlessness.

Under guard, Sheridan was ushered into their presence. There were six of them, grouped around a table at which sat a rawboned man with an immense shock of black hair which fell down to his shoulders. Framing them were the fire-blackened walls studded with splotches of yellow where fresh planks had boarded up the holes.

The black-haired man looked up keenly. "I reckon you know you're due to be hung, Sheridan. You knew it when you robbed the bank."

The young bandit shrugged. He wondered without much interest why they were spending so much time over him. To see his trim body, poised so alertly and so easily, one would have said that nothing could rob it of life.

Jeffrey Dukes ran thin fingers through

his black hair before going on. "I reckon you know, too, what kind of a law's-end town Bear Paw is. Askin' a man to marshal it is like giving him a one-way ticket to hell. Three gents done tried it already and got planted right after. Less'n a man's some kind of a fightin' damn' fool, he'd put a bullet in his own leg 'fore he'd touch it. There ain't a man here, or no place else that I know of, with the kind of cocksure sand it'd take to do the job."

One of the councilmen was idly flipping a half dollar into the air and catching it. He missed it, and the coin rolled to the floor at Sheridan's feet. The man stooped after it, and for a moment the butt of the gun in his holster was within inches of the bandit's hand.

Thought and action were almost instantaneous with Stub Sheridan. Even before the man had fully stooped, he had jerked the weapon free and was backing away with the gun sweeping over the six men. The stooping man straightened with an oath.

The young bandit grinned. "Changed my mind, gents. There ain't goin' tuh be no hangin'. Don't make a gunplay, 'cause it'll shore be tough if yuh do."

JEFFREY DUKES did not move. "Wait a minute, Sheridan," he said, and there was a piercing quality in his keen voice which could not be denied.

"We're lookin' for a marshal," snapped Dukes, "and we kind of figured you'd be the man."

Sheridan laughed. "Me? Marshal yore damned town?"

"That's it. Oh, we ain't being plumb fools about it. We've heard that you're plenty tough, but that you ain't bad. That's the kind of an hombre we need on this job. Figure it square, kid. You'll get out of this room all right, and there's a chance you'll get out of town. But it's only a chance, and a slim one. Three to one, you'd be mowed down 'fore you could get a hoss."

There was no abating of the quick alertness in Sheridan's position. But the light of daring recklessness shone in his cool brown eyes. While he knew perfectly that his chance of escape was slight, he did not consider the fact with any fear.

"Sort of puttin' my head in a rope both ways, eh?" he grinned. "How in hell do I know yo're on the square?"

"You don't. But you'd have been hung long before this if we hadn't been sort of talkin' it over."

"Mister, yo're shore a bunch uh trustin' gents."

"Not so much as you'd think, Sheridan."

Quickly Stub Sheridan walked to the table and placed the gun on it. "I'll give it a whirl, mister. Damned if mebbe I won't even like it. Yuh've talked yoreself into a marshal."

For the first time Jeffrey Duke's stern features relaxed. He leaned back in his chair. "Son, you never made a smarter choice in your life. *There ain't any shells in that gun. It was a plant.* If you'd run for it, you'd never have lived to hang."

One of the councilmen, tall, burly Christopher Flynn, pressed his way to the front. "Mind ye now," he boomed. "I ain't favoring it. He's a no-good hellion. He'll give us a hellion's law!"

Jeffrey Duke's eyes flickered to him. "Vote went against you, Flynn. Things can't go like they been doing."

Sheridan laughed softly; the sound was low-pitched and melodious, directed at the store owner. "Mebbe yo're right, at that."

Dukes pulled open a drawer of the table and drew out the Colt .45 which had been taken from the bandit while he lay unconscious. 'Here's your iron, Sheridan, and the badge to go with it. Ain't nobody to swear you in. You just got it. Do right by it."

Stub Sheridan's lithe fingers curled around the cedar butt of the gun, and there was a peculiar satisfaction in his cool eyes.

"What and who you'll be buckin' ain't no secret here," stated Dukes, his voice charged abruptly with a harsh note. "'Jade' Callison is the man, an' the Six Bullets Saloon is the devil-greased hub of this town. As a combination, it's tough to beat, as plenty of good men have found out. I'm wishin' you luck, and I hope you got guts. You'll be needin' 'em both."

The new marshal of Bear Paw looked over his shoulder as he drifted with his deceptive ease toward the door.

"If yuh ain't busy," he stated, "I'll be holdin' a little powwow at the Six Bullets —tonight."

CHAPTER II

JADE CALLISON

OUTSIDE the charred building, Sheridan cocked an eye at a man who was lounging in the shade. "Where do most folks do their eatin' here?"

"Depends on what yuh want—grease or grub. If'n it's grease, most any place'll do. If'n yo're tarnation hongry, hit the hash joint just below the store."

Stub Sheridan slid onto a stool at the counter mentioned, and as the place was deserted, banged a knife on the scarred wood. That bringing no response, he seized the massive glass salt cellar and began to drum insistently with it. As he was not a man of gentle methods, the receptacle eventually shattered; he stared quizzically at a finger from which the blood oozed.

"That'll be a dollar extra," a voice informed him.

He looked up, grinning. His startled gaze fell upon a girl standing in the doorway which led to the kitchen. She wore a flowered gingham dress and her hair was a flaming red. Never, thought young Sheridan instantly, had he seen such utterly red hair in his life. She was not precisely beautiful, but there was an extraordinary amount of life, pertness, and vivacity about her.

"Charge it to the town council," he chuckled. Then he leaned forward over the counter. "Say, how come you to jump in front uh my pony that-away yestiday?"

"I'm just naturally peace-loving," she told him with a shake of her red head. Then: "We charge for talkin' same as eatin' here, mister, so make up your mind which you want to do."

"I reckon," said the marshal calmly, "I'm goin' to run up a bill here that'll make the council have fits."

"Suit yourself," she told him. "It'll be a dollar a minute."

"Too cheap," he advised her solemnly. "It's worth five. I'll take the next thirty, and while we're talkin', yuh might throw together a platter uh ham an' eggs. Figger about six orders of each, an' if yuh got a pail out there heap it up with coffee."

"I suppose you take dynamite 'stead o' salt on your eggs," she flung at him as she disappeared into the kitchen.

He sprang over the counter at a bound and followed her, leaning casually against the jamb of the door as she sent the eggs hissing into the skillet. "Yuh shore took a chance on bein' trampled."

"Did I?"

"Yeah. Danged if I know yet why I didn't do it."

"Maybe you didn't have the nerve, Mr. Badman. It takes more'n wind to do a job of bank robbin' in this town."

"Pick up the chips, 'Red'," grinned the marshal. "Yore hand is tops." He dodged just in time as a saucer which lay ready to her hand clattered against the wall by his head.

There was laughter in the girl's shining blue eyes despite the provoked set of her full lips. And with a slight flush deepening the rich color of her cheeks, Sheridan noted, she became more striking than any girl he had ever seen.

"Reckon yuh don't know I'm supposed to be reformed," he said. "The council done appointed me marshal."

The girl's blue eyes sparkled mischievously. "This town sure gets the raw end of things."

"That's what an old geezer with a gray beard thought. Don't know as him an' me are goin' to get along much. What's yore name, did yuh say?"

"I didn't say. That ain't thrown in with the vittles here."

The meal was cooked and eaten much too soon to please Stub Sheridan. During the course of it, he dodged other missiles, and his respct for the fiery-tempered, carrot-topped girl mounted accordingly. Whether she regarded him as anything other than a stray target for her biting comments he could not make her out, but when he left at last, she went to the curtained window and from behind it

watched his easy, graceful progress down the street. Her brows were puckered, and on her face was a quick look of awakened interest.

THE Six Bullets saloon, gambling hall and honkatonk was the largest structure in the town. No saloon in Bear Paw received a greater patronage, for Jade Callison understood perfectly the rough and rugged temper of the men of the frontier. Whiskey flowed often "on the house," and surprisingly large sums of money were occasionally won at the tables. Why not?

Jade Callison was wont to explain shrewdly that it all came back. Callison made a great pretense of running an honest outfit, and he himself had shot one of the house dealers who was unfortunate enough to be detected with a deck of crimped cards. He maintained a lavish and specially built office on the second floor.

On the evening of Stub Sheridan's elevation to the post of marshal, the Six Bullets was humming with a boisterous, hearty roar. Streamers of smoke, the pungent tang of raw whiskey, and the sharp odors of cheap perfume blended into a reek over the heads of the milling men who clustered at the tables and banked deep at the bar. Penetrating occasionally through the steady, surflike boom of voices came the wheezy strains from a battered melodeon which was tucked in a corner of the dancing space at the rear.

Word of Sheridan's appointment had spread rapidly, and though the furor of the evening was rising to its height when he made his appearance, he was spotted immediately. A raucous howl went up from a miner by the door.

"Lor' love us, it's the marshal!"

Unperturbed, a faint smile pulling at his mouth, Stub Sheridan drifted through the assemblage which parted before him. In the midst of the rugged brawn which surrounded him, he looked more than ever diminutive. Many mistook his easy carelessness for unsureness, but at one point as he passed, a voice muttered: "Ever see a mountain lion stalkin' its kill? Well, yo're lookin' at one."

Reaching the bar, he called for a bottle of whiskey, got it, and turned to the crowd. Other activity in the saloon had stopped. The melodeon had gasped into silence, and Bear Paw in all of its inelegance and hardness was surging up close to him, crowding him. Harsh, bearded faces were peering into his.

But the cool eyes of this small, broad-shouldered young hellion did not waver. Nor did he lose any of his singular poise as he stepped forward into the heart of the circle. Automatically they stumbled backward, opening a lane. He bounded upward as if there were springs on the balls of his feet, scattering chips as he landed in a half crouch on one of the stud tables.

From there, gripping the whiskey bottle in one hand and swinging his gun by the trigger guard with the other, he surveyed the mob below him. Christopher Flynn was there, he noted, and Jeffrey Dukes, and the rest of the council. The room was quiet, but Sheridan knew that it was not because he exerted any strange power over it. They were simply waiting to see what he would do. There was an excellent chance that he would never jump down from that table alive.

"GENTS," he began, and his low voice flowed out with an uncanny penetration, "if yuh ain't never had a marshal before, yuh've got one now. I never was much on spillin' windies about what I aimed to do, an' I reckon this ain't a good time to start. But I'll tell yuh this. You kin call the game an' I'll play it. I'll drink with yuh or gamble with yuh or fight with yuh at the drop of a hat. I been doin' them things all my life an' I don't mind tellin' yuh I'm pretty good at 'em.

"Fact is, if yuh can't make a row once in a while on yore own hooks, I'll kick one up myself. There ain't goin' to be no damn' fool reg'lation 'bout packin' artillery. Tote yore smoke-poles if yuh want to; tote a dozen of 'em. But bear in mind that if yuh get liquored up an' start makin' merry with 'em, yuh'll have old Aunt Betsy here in my right hand to

answer to. The old gal done some man-plantin' not so long ago, an' she's plumb hard to hold in, once she gets the bit in her teeth. Well, I reckon that's the works, boys. Anybody else want to do any talkin'?"

For the most part his words had had at least a temporary effect. A mutter and shuffling of feet swung through the crowd. But the miner who had announced the marshal's arrival staggered to the edge of the table, mouthing curses. Half drunk, he was a mountainous individual with great hairy paws and a stubbled jaw that bulged threateningly. His huge blank eyes, bloodshot and half closed, glared up at Sheridan.

"What the hell kind of talk do yuh call that?" he roared. "Call the game and you'll play it, eh? Come down off'n there, yuh mouthy blattin' son! I'll pull yore fangs. Bring that man-plantin' pea-shooter with yuh."

Stub Sheridan weighed, in his boots, a hundred and fifty-nine pounds, and he had learned his tactics in a hard school. He made no reply now, but quick as light, his right foot swung out. There was the snapping crunch of broken teeth, a smear of blood, and as the miner reeled backward, Sheridan dived head foremost after him. And as he leaped, his gun clattered crazily on the table top behind him.

There was no science to Stub Sheridan's attack. He had been taught none. He had battled at knuckle and skull for his life since his boyhood. On the miner's side were two hundred and more pounds of sheer brawn, and a brawling drunken rage. Stub Sheridan was taking into the fight his hundred and fifty-nine pounds of speed and litheness. And coupled with that was an extraordinarily developed muscular efficiency together with a co-ordination between brain and strength which few men possessed.

They landed together in a tangle on the pine floor, the miner bellowing like a bull and the marshal twisting in his grip.

They rolled free of each other, were on their feet, and came stamping back into close quarters, their fists swinging. Neither man maintained a guard or sought with cunning to tire the other. It was a slashing, vicious battle, the kind of a battle that men stare at with their eyes hot and burning, their fists clenched white, their throats dry and hoarse. And thus it was that night in the hot, smoky, high-ceilinged room of the Six Bullets.

WHEN they clinched again, Stub Sheridan's shirt split down the back from the violence of his muscular straining. It revealed a skin as white as milk, but also a sea of turbulent muscles, a sea that leaped and rippled and rolled. The miner's blood stained it so that some strange and weird drawing seemed to have been etched there in flame.

From the miner's bearded lips were bursting savage, inhuman sounds. His hulk was like an iron mound sheathed with movable bands of steel. It shocked when blow after blow drove against it, but it did not crumble. His hairy paws groped for his foe, or, balled into blackish lumps, drove out with the crashing impact of a sledge.

But the marshal's lean body was moving in and out, back and forth and around with phenomenal swiftness. When he charged, the impact had the concentration and force of a bullet.

The miner caught a fistful of knuckles on his battered mouth and crashed backward through a table which collapsed into splintered wreckage under his weight. The marshal could have killed him then. He had seen men die under a barrage of flailing boots, and he had risked that death himself more than once, but hard as he was, Stub Sheridan could not bring himself to use that death stroke.

In the sickly yellow light from the battery of oil lamps overhead he waited, poised still, alert, on the balls of his feet. His shirt was wholly gone now, and his pale white skin with its rippled padding was a mass of bruises, raw scratches, and splotches of blood.

A groan, hissed out of taut lungs, went up from the crowd as Sheridan neglected his chance for the kill. The miner, stunned and dazed, was on his feet again,

a roar rumbling and choking in his throat.

They came together with the force of a hammer striking the anvil. Then the little marshal, straining for a hold, slipped in a patch of red on the floor. The miner plunged over and past him, whirled and came lunging back. Sheridan was down, a foot snared in the rungs of a chair. No scruples attended the miner's attack. One of his heavy boots lashed out at the fallen man, straight for his head. Squirming, Sheridan caught the blow on his shoulder. The whole of his left side, from the waist up, went numb.

The miner's boot swung back. Nothing would stop it. But from the crowd a man darted out. It was a towering, great-chested Christopher Flynn. His boot hit that of the miner's as his foot swung forward. The miner tripped on his own leg, stumbled down.

In the instant of respite, Stub Sheridan worked free. With his good right hand he lifted the chair which had entangled him, brought it sweeping down over the miner's head.

There was a long, breathless, silent pause, then grinning through battered lips, the marshal picked up the bottle and gun from the table, dangling them as before. "I shore admire an hombre who kin put up the kind of a talk he did," he said. "Anybody else got anything to say?"

IT seemed then that everybody in the place had something to say, and it was said so vociferously that the windows rattled and one of the oil-lamp chandeliers came crashing to the floor. The bar groaned as they surged against it, carrying Sheridan with them.

It was there, some half hour later, that he was reached by a thin-featured man who worked his way through the press of men like a rat weaving through the holes and corridors of a garbage dump.

"Jade Callison's honin' to see yuh," he said into Sheridan's ear.

"Let him hone. I'm busy."

"He ain't used tuh waitin', mister. Upstairs. First door on the left."

"I ain't used to takin' orders. Slide along. Yo're crowdin' my elbow."

Three drinks later, however, Stub Sheridan moved away from the bar. He wanted a look at this man who was the king-pin of Bear Paw's lawlessness. He went up the stairs, and without knocking pushed in through the first door on his left.

"You take your own sweet time, Sheridan!"

The words came at him with a low, guttural roll. For an instant he could see nothing. Lamps equipped with reflectors were banked at the back of the room so that anyone entering was at first dazzled and blinded. No one would ever take Jade Callison by surprise.

As the marshal's eyes accustomed themselves to the light, a figure loomed before them. Squatting behind a huge table was a man whose weight touched or exceeded three hundred pounds. Why Jade Callison rarely moved in the streets of Bear Paw was evident at a glance. Yellow, perpetually wet hair hung on both sides of a face which was knobbed with pulpy mounds of fat. His eyes gleamed black from the depths of narrow creases. His shoulders were huge round hummocks which sloped down to a body equally large.

His guttural voice went on without waiting for a reply to his first remark. "You've got the makings of a fighter in you, Sheridan."

Stub grinned faintly. "Yeah. Some folks think so." He was fascinated by the indefinable threat which was exuded by this gross-bodied man.

Had he been of a different temperament, Jade Callison might have been a great leader. He had that power, which is little short of hypnotism, of bending men to his will, of enveloping them in the strength of his personality. But Callison had turned bad, and instead of warmth there was a threat of evil about him.

The effect was heightened by the jade ornaments which he affected; from his shirt front, from his thick fingers, from the lobes of his ears sparkled the gems which imprisoned and turned to an un-

pleasant green the yellow light from the lamps.

"Figured yet, have you, how you're going to play this marshal job?"

"Some. Not much."

"Marshaling," said Callison, "gets a man one of two things—money or a grave."

Sheridan's handsome face did not change expression. "Maybe I better tell yuh now — threats never did set good with me."

"All right. I'll put it another way. This place isn't ready to be cleaned up yet. In ten years, maybe. Right now there's a slug of raw hot money to be made here. I've heard about you, Sheridan. I know who you are and what you've done. You owe nothing to these sniveling fools who want peace and law. You're too good a man. You can get too much by just taking it. You can clean up, and then drift along when the blow-up comes. Am I talking to the man I think I am?"

All of his life Stub Sheridan had been a drifter, a fighter, an adventurer. He said now coolly: "I never shot a man for offering me money."

Jade Callison settled his fat body more deeply in his chair. "You'll get your share, Sheridan. When the time comes, I'll get in touch with you."

Stub Sheridan was reckless, extraordinarily able, and utterly lacking in fear. There is a subtle difference between the lack of fear and the possession of courage. Stub Sheridan had no fear, but did he have courage? And with that courage the honor which is so inseparably a portion of it? That particular facet of his character had never as yet been tested. Though the marshal of Bear Paw did not know it, events were rapidly moving toward that crisis.

CHAPTER III

Callison's Trickery

"MAYBE," pronounced the red-haired Sally, "you'll pick on somebody your own size next time."

That was all the sympathy Stub Sheridan got from her when he appeared for breakfast the next morning with his features discolored and swollen.

He managed a painful grin. "That shore is a good sign I'm gettin' somewhere. So yuh went to all the trouble uh fidin' out where I was last night an' all about it, did yuh?"

She slapped his customary platter of ham and eggs down in front of him with a disdainful flirt of her shoulders. "Didn't need to ask. I could hear you yelpin' all the way up here when you got your foot caught in that chair. Why don't you watch where you're steppin'?"

He looked at her with a twinkle in his cool eyes. "Red, yuh shore make a man want tuh bend somethin' heavy over yore horns." He dodged the missile which inevitably followed his use of the name "Red," then straightened. "Say, though, honest, I've squared around some on that old codger with the gray beard. I'd uh been on the greased slide to Hades by now if it hadn't been for him. Sour old duck, but he's got his points."

"He'll be plumb tickled to know you like him," she said over her shoulder. "You're a great favorite of his, you know, specially since he thinks you sold out to Callison last night."

"Oh, he does, does he?" grunted Sheridan, for once in his life stumped for something to say. But the shot went home. The girl noticed the change in him, and after that she watched him covertly, as if she were denying to herself the failing she suspected in him.

The banter between them ceased, and shortly after the marshal reluctantly left. Sally hurried to the window, and with her trim, strong body concealed by the curtain, watched him go. She was there when big Christopher Flynn came clumping into the restaurant. He had seen Sheridan leaving, and now his gray brows knit as he looked at the girl.

"Sally, ye ain't int'rested in that young pup?"

She turned abruptly away, trying to hide her confusion with vehemence. "Course I ain't, Dad."

"Better not be," he warned gruffly. "The lad's no good. He's a boom-camp man, an' he's learned naught but fighting

an' helling. He'd sell out his own mother for a fistful of gold. I know the breed. They're flashy, but there's no heart in 'em, no heart or no soul."

The girl tossed her flaming red head, as if she could bear to listen to no more. As she half turned her eyes struck a figure just inside the doorway. He had entered so silently that neither had heard him. The girl remained motionless, her eyes fixed on him with a strange, uncontrollable fascination. "Dad!" she breathed. "Dad!"

Christopher Flynn, his mouth filled with buttered biscuit, wheeled around, scowled at what he saw. His iron jaws worked swiftly. "Jade Callison, eh? What brings ye down out o' your rat hole?"

The big, flabby-bodied man who could move so noiselessly when he chose, spread his fat palms up. "No man likes to sit in one place forever. And there are some things I cannot trust to others. Also—" His pulpy face betrayed a smile and he shuffled closer to the girl. "You must come and see me some time, my dear. I'm a lonely old man, and I need young life and beauty. There is a jade necklace in my safe I would like to give you. It is a lapidary's masterpiece. You would love it."

SALLY FLYNN backed away from him until the counter stopped her. She was repelled and horrified by this mountainous and almost hypnotic figure.

"Was it me ye came to see?" growled old Christopher harshly.

"Yes," said Callison, and his heavy voice lost its velvet, gained a note of steel. "There is a little matter—"

"Then come ye to the store. There can be no talking here."

At the door Jade Callison turned heavily around. "You'll come, then, my dear? Or perhaps you would rather I sent some one to fetch you?"

One of Sally Flynn's slim hands was at her throat. "No. No. I never—never wear necklaces."

Gnarled, rugged, graying Christopher Flynn was one of the few men of vision in Bear Paw. Not the vision of a dreamer but of the sturdy, solid landholder. He saw coming the end of the gold-boom period and the beginning of the country's history as a cattle range. The Bear Paw range, he knew, would eventually become one of the richest in the West.

From the government he had bought a thousand acres of the choicest land in the section. There would be good grazing land, winter and summer. From the proceeds of his store he was laying by a steadily growing sum of money which would be used when the time was ripe to stock that range. Flynn was too roughly independent, and too wise, to trust his money to the bank. It lay, instead, in the massive iron safe of the store.

Jade Callison also was a man of vision, though his was of the rapacious sort. He clearly saw the end of such men as himself, and he was determined to fortyfy himself against that time. He wanted a foothold in the generation which was to follow, and it was natural that he should go about securing it as he did everything else—with his strength, his guns, his cupidity.

"Flynn," said Jade Callison as they settled down in the little office at the rear of the store, "you'll sell out to me."

Christopher Flynn's old eyes narrowed as he scrutinized his visitor. "Ye didn't come to buy, Callison, ye came to plunder. I'll not sell. Ye know that."

"The store and your land both, Flynn. Five thousand dollars and safe conduct out of Bear Paw."

"It's a threat ye're making me," rumbled old Christopher. "I'll warn ye in return. There's coming an end to your power here. Ye've gutted Bear Paw of its honesty, an' turned it into a black pit of death and dishonor to suit the evil schemes that boil in that dirty brain of yours. But it can't last. There's men here with iron in their backbones. They'll rise up, with God behind 'em, an' sweep your kind into hell."

Callison's black eyes were the merest slits. "No, Flynn, that won't ever happen. I'll be a changed man, an honorable man, by the time the town makes up its mind to do that. If they had a man or two like you to spur them on, I think they might." He leaned forward in his chair,

a certain stiffness taking hold on his flabby body, his words jerking out with a staccato harshness. "I want five more years of power, Flynn. I'll get them. You're in my way. You'll never—"

BUT Christopher Flynn was before him. He whipped out his revolver, leveled it at the saloon man's stomach. Jade Callison was left with his hand under the flap of his coat near the shoulder. It dropped away soggily.

"Ye'd have shot be," blazed Flynn. "By God, ye'd have done it in cold blood. If I was the man I should be, I'd drill ye now." Shaking with rage, he tried to pull the trigger of his weapon. He could not do it. Christopher Flynn had never committed murder, and he could not do it now.

"Get out," he groaned hoarsely. "Get back to your rat hole, Jade Callison. But if ye come out again, I'll put a slug in your dirty hide on sight!"

The second dramatic incident of Stub Sheridan's career as marshal of Bear Paw occurred in the early evening of that same day.

Lounging over an after-dinner cigarette in his office, he was aroused by a hoarse, bellowing voice, the rattle of shots and the sound of lead ripping into woodwork. Leaping to his feet and running to the door, he discovered that the miner whom he had whipped in the Six Bullets was astraddle of the street's center, driving the town to cover with a pair of exploding six-guns. He was apparently in the last stages of a drunken orgy, and his raucous shouts dared anyone to check the killing meanness which ran rampant through his veins.

Sheridan walked calmly toward him. While seemingly careless and indifferent, his body was in reality keyed up to hair-trigger alertness. His hand rested on the butt of the Colt at his hip, but he did not draw it.

For a moment it looked as if the miner would whirl his gun and shoot the marshal dead. There was that brief hesitation, that settling of the shoulders, that instant of stiffening in which a man whips himself to the pitch of such a deed. Then his hands dropped to his sides.

Stub Sheridan took the guns from them. "Come along, old son. Sleep it off." He looked sharply at the man as he left him in the jail's single cell.

He seemed to catch a certain knowing leer in the miner's eyes, and once out of the street he had lost his drunken shamble. Queer, that was, and the catch had been too easy.

Half an hour later, the thin-featured, lean-shouldered man who had brought him Jade Callison's message before, stepped into the office. His eyes, as if perpetually colored by the shade of his master's hobby, were a dull green. There was unpleasantness in them which sprang mostly probably from jealousy. "Dodge" Dodgeson was Callison's right-hand gunman, and he resented the coming of Stub Sheridan.

He spoke curtly. "When yuh git damned good an' ready, Sheridan, Jade wants to see yuh."

"Shore decent of yuh," said Stub lazily. "If yuh'd took more time about runnin' yore own little errand, it'd uh saved yuh trouble. I was jist headin' over there myself."

HE went jauntily out of the building. Before the door of Jade Callison's office, he paused. "Turn down them damned lights," he called. "Sheridan talking."

When he entered a minute later, the lights had been dimmed.

Jade Callison nodded from behind his desk. "Congratulations, marshal. A few more plays like the jailing of that drunk and you'll have a rep in this town. Folks'll be behind you solid."

"Yeah. That's what I come to see yuh about. What's the game, Callison? He was no more fightin' drunk than I am. It was a stall. He *wanted* tuh git jugged."

Jade Callison smiled blandly. "Son, stick with me and you'll go places. You've got a head on you."

"Quit talkin' an' say somethin'. How come, Callison?"

Jade Callison fished in a drawer of the desk and brought out a packet of cur-

rency. He peeled off ten hundred-dollar bills and pushed them across the desk. "There's the first installment, Sheridan. There'll be more later." His black eyes in their slits of fat were glittering. "You can figure on an attempted rescue tonight."

The marshal snorted. "Who the hell wants tuh lift that jasper out uh clink?"

"Nobody. But while you are courageously staving off the attempt, there'll be another job pulled in a different part of town."

"Yeah? What job?"

Jade Callison regarded the marshal steadily. "The bank."

Sheridan grinned. "Those boys are shore pannin' on a tough crick. Hope yuh do a better job than I did. How does the split go?"

"You and me. The rest get paid for working." Callison extended a box of cigars toward his new partner. "Light up, Sheridan. There aren't any better smokes in 'Frisco. You've struck it rich, and you'll be riding the flood from here in."

Through the rich smoke, Stub Sheridan studied the room. He saw now that there were thin slits in the wall just behind Callison's desk. The slits gave him a view of the bar and gambling space below. From below, however, they were effectively screened by scrollwork on the bare face of the wall. It was through them, of course, that Callison had witnessed the marshal's fight on the previous evening. On a shelf beneath the slits lay a pair of shotguns.

The room, obviously, had been refinished after the building was completed, for it was paneled in imported oak. There seemed to be no means of egress other than the single door. Sheridan's cool eyes probed keenly at the panels; they appeared solid enough. He wondered if one of them were hinged.

At length he arose, stuffing the bills into a trouser pocket. "Count on my end of it," he said.

"Sure, I'll do that." And Jade Callison watched him go with his shrewd little eyes gleaming hotly.

CHAPTER IV

Gun Lightning

STUB SHERIDAN dropped in at the restaurant for pie and a cup of coffee. For dinner and supper he had avoided the place. He was troubled by what the girl had said, and he was troubled by the girl herself. There was enough decency in Stub Sheridan so that he had known from the first that he had no business being interested in the red-haired, vivacious Sally. She deserved something better. He had been at one time or another in his brief but brilliant career, a bank robber, a holdup man, and general drifter and gunman in the gold camps.

Yet in spite of his intentions, he could not keep away from the girl. He scoffed at the idea that he was in love with her, but he wanted to be near her. He liked to watch the sparkle of light in her red hair. He regarded hungrily the warm bloom of her cheeks, the inviting curve of her lips. He wanted more than he wanted anything else to fold her in his lithe powerful arms and kiss her.

But he refrained from doing it. And because he didn't, and hated not doing it, he went slogging ahead according to his warped code in the way of living which was familiar to him.

If Sally Flynn had kissed Stub Sheridan full on the mouth and told him that she loved him unbearably, he would have changed his plans. But the woman who will do that is exceedingly rare, and Sally was not one of them.

The eating of the pie was a dismal affair. The girl placed it mutely before him and withdrew to the kitchen. There was hurt in her tender eyes, the hurt of a woman who knows that the man she loves is a rascal who chooses his villainy wilfully.

There was no banter between them. The marshal gulped his pie, washed it down with a swallow of the hot coffee, and stalked out. Bitterness was gnawing at him. He would go through with the deal as Jade Callison had outlined it. Why not? He had nothing to lose and there was money to be gained. Then he

would shake the dust of this hell-spawned town from his heels. To hell with this marshaling job, with Jade Callison, and with this red-haired girl who had smiled her way into his heart.

In the stuffy interior of his office, with the light out, he waited. He swore luridly; he had forgotten to ask Callison when the attempt would be made. It might be hours yet, and he could do nothing but wait drearily.

The warning came sooner than he had expected. At about ten o'clock he was roused from a half doze by the tramp of booted feet on the walk in front of the office. A gun butt hammered at the door.

"Who is it?"

"Open up, Sheridan! We're haulin' out yore prisoner. Open up, damn yuh, or we'll blast yuh out."

"Try it," snarled the marshal, and into the words he put all of the venom which had been stored up by his bitter musings.

His answer was the roar of an exploding shell. He saw the holes where the lead went high through the panel and into the ceiling.

IT occurred to him very suddenly that the attack might be a ruse of Callison's, and that he, Sheridan, was to be killed during it. He slung a pair of bullets through the door, high enough to clear a man's head but low enough to make him careful, and dived behind the table which he overturned and dragged into a corner. Lead sang in through the window spaces which were nothing stouter than oiled paper.

Directly after the first shot had been fired into his door the marshal was aware of hoofs thundering in the main street of Bear Paw. Between the blasts of his own shooting he could hear the popping of six-guns and the bark of carbines from up the drag.

"Damned funny way to rob a bank," he told himself. "What in hell's the matter with 'em?"

Three or four minutes of desultory shooting elapsed. The fusillade from up the street increased. It was amounting almost to a pitched battle. Stub Sheridan sprang to his feet, suspicion beginning to grow and fasten in his mind. Through the bullet perforations in the paper window glowed a red color. Some building had been torched.

Then as the rattle of shots lulled for a moment he heard clearly the piercing sound of a woman's scream. It was Sally's voice; he knew that instantly. He would have known it anywhere.

Cursing furiously, he leaped for the door, tore it open, and darted into the street. A tortured groan ripped out of his throat.

The front of the Christopher Flynn store was ablaze. Flames were skyrocketing into the air, dyeing the near-by structures a bloody red. Horsemen poured a hail of lead into the stricken building.

Bullets pricked at the marshal from his own besiegers, but he disregarded them. With amazing speed he raced through the pulpy dust in the direction of the fire. But before he had covered twenty feet, a ragged column of riders swung around the corner from the rear of the store.

Sheridan whipped up his gun, thumbing the hammer in a blaze of speed; the range was too great for effect. His bullets were wild. With a whoop and a final surge of gunfire the raiders spurred away into the night, a film of bloody dust billowing up behind them. All were masked, but crouching in their lead Sheridan recognized the lean shoulders of Dodge Dodgeson, Jade Callison's right-hand gunman.

With the departure of the raiders, men poured out of other buildings like ants into a runway. Shouts and oaths rumbled into the hot air. "Buckets! Water! Form a line!"

THOUGH the jam of milling men leaped Stub Sheridan, through the store's blazing doorway into the smoky interior. He stumbled over a body, found that the man was dead, and pelted on. Through the swirling red fog, he fought his way, his slitted eyes streaming, his lungs laboring painfully. He stopped to get his bearings. A man was hanging over the counter; it looked ab-

surdly as if he were trying to pick up something which had fallen on the floor. A glance sufficed to tell that a shotgun at close quarters had done the work.

Hesitating, Sheridan bawled: "Sally!"

A voice answered him and he ran on. Behind him the front of the building was collapsing. He reached the doorway of the little office. Smoke was gushing into it, and he pulled the panel shut.

Sprawled on the floor was old Christopher Flynn, a gash laying open the side of his head, one arm twisted brokenly under him. The girl, her red hair streaming over his shoulders, was kneeling by his side, trying to lift him up, trying to carry him to safety. His massive bulk was too great for her; she could barely raise his shoulders. Behind them the old iron safe was cracked open; a sledge hammer was embedded in its gutted interior.

Stub Sheridan bent over the old man, gripping him by the shoulders. But Sally flung herself against him, hard little fists beating at his face.

"Don't touch him, you coward! Oh, you miserable coward! You let them do this. You helped them!"

"I didn't know," he burst out savagely. "How was I tuh know?"

Her tear-stained, smoke-grimed face stared at him pitifully. "You must have," she cried. "Dad knows that you went to see Callison tonight. He put on extra guards and stayed here himself. And then it happened. And you weren't here. You stayed away on purpose." Her voice was hysterical. "I thought I loved you, but I don't. Dad was right. You're no good. There's no heart in you."

"Him?" exclaimed Sheridan. "Yore old man?"

"Yes. Now get out, do you hear me! Don't touch him. I can carry him!"

She fell across the big storekeeper's body, sobbing, gasping from the smoke.

Sternly, his handsome face bleak and cold, Stub Sheridan lifted Christopher Flynn under one arm, supported the girl with the other. He staggered back into the roaring inferno of the store proper. The girl tugged at his elbow, led him blinded and half smothered out through the rear.

For a time he lay there on the ground, eyes closed and shot through with a staggering pain. Rough voices surged above him. When he sat up he was alone. They had carried away Christopher Flynn, and the girl had gone with them, and they had left him there to meet whatever end might befall him.

He climbed to his feet dizzily and made his way around and between buildings to the main street. Two bucket lines were operating in the red glare. There was no hope of saving the store or its contents, but they were battling fiercely to check the fire on either side before it swept the whole town into charred cinders.

He toiled with the gangs of men, silent, his lips set grimly. They stared at him, but only one man vouchsafed a bitter comment.

"Shore a whizz at savin' yore own hide, ain't yuh, marshal?"

Stub Sheridan made no reply. He worked stubbornly on with his head lowered. Only a short sixty minutes before, no man could have said such a thing to him and remained upright.

It was two scorching hours before the fire was subdued. Havoc had been wrought in Bear Paw.

Stub Sheridan threw down his bucket, drew a hand across his blistered forehead, and stalked away in the direction of the Six Bullets Saloon and the office of Jade Callison.

CHAPTER V

Badgeless Lawman

THE lights were not dimmed this time when he went in. Jade Callison, gross and damp haired, was waiting for him, alone.

Sheridan halted before the desk, crouching a little. His voice was low, harsh. "Yuh crossed me, Callison, damn yuh!"

"Pshaw, man, one place is as good as another. I changed my mind at the last minute."

"The hell yuh did. You intended to

smash Flynn all along. I been playin' the fool, but that's over. I'm marshal an' I'm actin' now 'cordin' tuh the law. I want Dodgeson!"

Jade Callison's deep tones rumbled gutturally. "Wait a minute, Sheridan. What makes you think you can back down now?"

"I ain't backin' down. I'm doin' what I swore I'd do when I took office."

"You s w o r e!" exclaimed Callison. "Why, you jabbering idiot, that's over with now. You cut that oath to ribbons when you stayed at the jail tonight. You swore! What the hell do you think you can do? Toss that tin badge of yours in the ash heap one minute an' wear it the next? When it's ditched once, it's ditched for keeps. Don't come to me with your maudlin ravings about being an honest man. I know better. You're a gutless pup."

"I want Dodgeson!" choked Sheridan savagely. "An' by Gawd, I'm takin' you along with him. There'll be law here if I have tuh be judge, jury an' hangman."

His gun flicked out, boring into the big man's middle. "All right, Callison! Coming?"

Jade Callison's flabby lips parted in a sneer. "You damned fool. You poor damned fool. Who would you take me to? The town's looking for you, my lad. They're out to get this hellion of a marshal who sold 'em out. Maybe they'd hang me, too. It ain't likely, but it's a sure thing you'd be dangling from the limb ahead of me."

"Get up, Callison. Stand on yore legs!"

Slowly and ponderously Jade Callison rose, bellying up from behind the desk like some threatening monster. He looked past Stub Sheridan and nodded.

Sheridan grinned crookedly. "Not me, Callison. I know that one. I may hang, but you'll hang along with—" Then the thought of the possible secret panel flicked out of his memory.

In a flash he had turned, slinging his gun around. He caught a fleeting glimpse of a black gaping hole behind one of the oak sections, and of Dodgeson's evil, thin-featured face snarling at him. Sheridan's gun roared, but it was too late. A weight crashed down on his head, blinding him, deflecting the bullet. He slumped down and over the edge of unconsciousness.

DAWN was within half an hour of breaking through the darkness at the eastern rim of the horizon when feeling and reason came seeping back to Stub Sheridan. He was lyig face down in the alley behind the Six Bullets. The ground sloped sharply away below him to an accumulation of shacks and scrap heaps.

Over him towered the black bulk of the saloon, and as he sat up, he could see the moonlight glittering on the hinges and lock of the great double doors through which barrels of whiskey were hauled into the saloon's storage cellars.

He shook his head wonderingly. So they hadn't killed him? Why not?

His brain was whirling and refused to focus on the problem. One eye was closed fast by blood which had dried there from the wound on his scalp; he worked it open carefully. He stumbled to his feet and discovered that his gun was still clenched tightly in his right fist. So rigid and stiff were the fingers that he had to pry them loose.

Automatically he slid the gun into its holster. It kept going, scraped his leg, and rattled on the ground. His holster and cartridge belt were gone! Suspicion burned into his mind, and picking up the weapon, he examined the cylinder. A grating laugh escaped him when he found that the shells had been carefully extracted.

Jade Callison's reason for sparing him, then, was clear. The fat man was playing a grim little joke. At one stroke he would disclaim all connection with the marshal and deliver him, defenseless, to the town. With a bulletless gun Stub Sheridan would be captured as a matter of course. And with its blood lust spent upon him, the town would be less keen to attack Jade Callison, against

whom it had no direct evidence for the night's outrage.

Grimly Stub Sheridan thrust the useless weapon into his belt and pulled his shirt over the butt. Now what? Shells were the first thing. With bullets in his gun there would be a chance of winning through to face Jade Callison again. What happened after that he didn't care. But his body and his brain were aflame with the torturing desire to meet the huge-framed saloon owner again in his oak-paneled office. The memory of the last interview clung to him with a searing bitterness.

Sounds of the commotion in the street penetrated to him for the first time. The town was in an uproar which had continued since the quelling of the fire. Callison, Stub Sheridan thought suddenly, would have to move, and move fast.

He walked to the corner of the building and began to slide up the narrow black space which flanked it.

Halfway to the main street, a voice slapped at him. 'Hold on, there. Who is it?"

The marshal peered ahead. The blackness was complete. He said: "Don't move. It's Sheridan. I got yuh covered!"

A stab of flame lashed out, and the slug fanned past his head. He dropped flat. The gun boomed again, and the bullet tore into wood inches from him.

"All right," he called. "I was bluffin'. I got no gun."

"Come on ahead then, but come easy," the voice instructed.

There were no lights on the street and the blinds of illuminated rooms were closely drawn, but once in the open, Sheridan recognized his captor. In the dimness rawboned Jeffrey Dukes with his long black hair looked more savage than civilized.

"Trot along, Sheridan," he advised harshly. "Your string's done played out. Make for the courthouse. Had a hunch the Six Bullet'd be the place to locate you." Striding with Sheridan before him, he spoke to other figures along the way. "Call in the boys. I got him."

There were almost fifty men crammed into the charred interior of Bear Paw's converted courthouse. A dull murmur went up as Stub Sheridan was brought into the room. Eyes, bloodshot and weary, glared at him. Bearded mouths framed curses.

Stub Sheridan took it without flinching. The muscles of his face were set and immobile. In spite of his disreputable condition, in spite of the head wound which had bloodied his face, neck and shoulder, there was something indomitable about him as he stood there. His body still retained that electric alertness, still gave off that powerful impression of balanced and co-ordinated energy.

Christopher Flynn was in the center of the room, haranguing the assembly. There was a thick bandage around his forehead, and his right arm was bound up in a sling. But the strength had not flowed entirely out of his massive frame.

"So ye'll stand for it, will ye?" he was shouting. "Have ye no sand in yer bellies? Will ye see a man among ye burned out and robbed of all he has, and do naught about it? It's not just for myself I'm asking it. Any one or all o' ye may be next. What Jade Callison wants, he takes. There's naught too mad or too bloody for the swine to do."

A man in the crowd rose up, his piping voice almost hysterical. "Yo're askin' too much, Flynn. There's no proof that Callison done it. Some of us here got families."

"Proof!" roared Christopher Flynn, shaking with anger. "Proof! What more proof do ye need. There's not a man among ye but knows in his heart that Callison done it. I'm pleading with ye now to wipe him out, for the sake o' them families ye set such store by. Who's with me in storming the Six Bullets and dragging out to a gallows the killer that's in it?"

WORDS stormed over the packed files of men. They were hard men, able men, but the fear of Jade Callison was printed deeply upon them.

Out of the smoke and the rumble of voices a man called: "Ye are wounded,

man. Ye are in no fit shape to lead so perilous a thing."

The verdict caught hold, stuck. Christopher Flynn, the blaze in his eyes dimming to disappointment, read it truly, and slumped down into his chair.

Jeffrey Dukes, standing with Stub Sheridan by the door, clinched the words. Perspiration was on him and his lean face was taut. "They've decided, Christopher. We must wait a bit. But there's somethin' now we can do. There's a long delayed hanging we'll finish up tonight. There ain't no charges necessary. I reckon you all know our marshal went weak-livered and sold us out."

He stepped to Stub Sheridan and tore the badge from his shirt. "Lay hold of him," he said. "It's an ugly thing, but it must be done."

But with the first surge of men toward him, Stub Sheridan leaped back against the wall. From under his shirt he jerked out the empty gun, waving it before him. His jaw was set with the desperation of futility, his eyes aflame.

"Hold hard!" he snapped, and the move of men halted. "There's death six times waitin' for yuh, gents. Don't risk nothin' yuh don't like. There's one thing I figger tuh do 'fore I hang. After it's done, I don't care a hoot in hell what happens to me."

Dukes was motionless, gaping at the miracle gun. Sheridan crouched a little, warningly; his face was white and the words jerked out of his throat with a gripping passion.

"I'd swear to yuh that I didn't know what Callison planned tonight, but yuh'd not believe me. All right, I'll take what's comin'. But 'fore yuh git me, I'm goin' after Callison. An' I'll git him if I have tuh tear the Six Bullets apart board by board tuh do it. I'll be needin' men tuh help me. Chris Flynn, God bless him, saved my hide once, an' I'm goin' out now tuh save his. He told yuh straight what's needed. If yuh ain't a pack uh curs yuh'll follow me. Are yuh comin' or do I go alone?"

There was a roar and a stamping of feet in the charred little building.

"I swear," blurted Sheridan, "I'll come back fer the hangin' when the job's done. Or if it'll be satisfaction for yuh, yuh kin hang my corpse."

Into the seething maelstrom which followed the words burst a woman. Framed in the doorway, she was middle-aged, with gray hair which was whipping wildly about her face. Stark terror was in her eyes.

"Sally Flynn," she choked. "Jade Callison's got Sally Flynn! His men came and took her to the saloon!"

Stub Sheridan plunged through the door, and his words rang behind. "Come on, or be damned to yuh!"

CHAPTER VI

Storming the Six Bullets

THE Six Bullets Saloon was prepared for an attack or a siege. Between his spies and his cunning, Jade Callison knew what was coming. Shutters had been bolted over the windows; the doors were barred; from the exterior not a light was visible in the place.

Behind Sheridan men poured from the courthouse. They spread along the street, taking shelter in store fronts, between buildings. A cordon of grim fighters was drawn around the big saloon. From one of them Sheridan, grinning at the memory of his bluff, collected an extra belt of cartridges.

In the first spreading grayness of dawn, bullets began to pump into the saloon. Over the town rose the bark and roar of exploding guns. While the sound was no novelty, the volume and duration were. There was a harsh, vicious quality about that sustained sound; there was a finality to it which told of unswervable purpose and of hardy, solid men who were fighting for their honor and their homes.

From the saloon, from window crevices and hacked loopholes came powder flashes. How many gunmen were inside it would have been hard to say. Fifteen at least; perhaps twice that number. Jade Callison, evidently, had no doubt of his power.

Let him beat off this attack, let him make a bloody demonstration of his strength, and he could squirm easily out of the charges which no one could prove. Bullets were the only charge which Callison could not evade, and Stub Sheridan was bringing them to him.

Bellied low behind the corner of a blacksmith shop across the street, Stub Sheridan's mind was leaping frantically from plan to plan. It might be days before the saloon could be shot or starved into submission. Fortified as it was, the place was well-nigh impregnable.

Nor could it be fired. Sally Flynn would perish with the defenders. A cold wave of apprehension cut through Stub Sheridan. Callison had taken the girl to use as his ace in the hole. He tried not to think of the danger she would be in should they succeed in fighting their way into the lower part of the saloon.

He squirmed backward, made his way through the rear of the building and up to the front again between two more. A man was lying there with his rifle propped over a canned-goods box, aiming carefully.

He waited for the shot, but it did not come. When he touched the man's shoulder, the rifle slid down to the ground. Jade Callison's gunmen had begun to take their deadly toll.

Slipping back, Sheridan made his way from point to point along the half of the circle which held the street opposite the saloon. Christopher Flynn, shooting grimly with his left hand, was among the group, and to him Sheridan gave his instructions. Flynn listened stolidly, but there was a new look of admiration on his rugged face as he studied the erstwhile marshal.

"Ye've got nerve, Sheridan," he said. "I'll grant ye that. But it's rank madness to pry into that hole alone."

Stub Sheridan laughed harshly. "Forget it. Use somethin' heavy. There's a beam in the blacksmith shop that's stout enough. Call fer volunteers on the ram, 'cause I reckon some uh the boys won't come back. Then keep 'em covered the best yuh can."

THERE were some twenty-five men in the group and under Flynn's orders, they trooped to the blacksmith shop. The place was partially exposed and bullets began to snick among them. Half of the company took firing positions and directed a scorching blast of shots against the saloon. Lead hailed against the shutters, splintered the areas near loopholes Under cover of the barrage, the remaining men tore down the heavy ceiling beam of the shop. With whatever material lay ready to hand, iron sheeting and board siding, they equipped the battering ram with crude shields.

When their purpose became apparent, the meagre firing from the saloon slackened still more; there was a rush of booted feet and the scrape of sliding objects as everything movable was rushed to back up the doors.

With the work under way, Sheridan picked up a six-foot bar of iron and taking Jeffrey Dukes with him headed for the rear of the Six Bullets. He guessed correctly that the threat at the front of the building would draw most of the defenders from the sides and rear.

Still given some scant concealment by the last vestiges of darkness, there were half a dozen Bear Paw men entrenched among the scattered shacks behind the saloon. As Sheridan and Dukes passed among them, they began a redoubled burst of firing. It continued, hotly and accurately.

Under cover of it, Sheridan and Dukes bellied forward. The indistinct shadows of early dawn aided them much, the scattered scrap heaps still more. Five minutes later they were close up against the towering hulk of the saloon, pressed flat at the base of the double doors leading to the storage cellars.

Methodically Stub Sheridan emptied his gun at one of the lower hinges. It bent, cracked and finally was torn loose.

He inserted the bar in the crack some two feet above the ground and strained back on it. It groaned and a black wedge-shaped hole appeared.

Sheridan shot a quick glance above them. They were too close in to be observed, he judged. "She's yours, Dukes,"

he grunted. Give me twelve inches, that's all."

Knots of muscle stood out on Jeffrey Dukes' neck and forearms as he braced himself and drew back on the lever. The massive door shivered and curled outward at the corner. Sheridan's head went through the opening, then his shoulders, his narrow thighs. He was drawing up his last foot behind him when a shot cracked from above. Dukes crumpled down with a broken shoulder, and the door snapped back into place. Stub Sheridan's jaw locked with pain as the timbers clamped on his foot.

Trapped! He was pinned there, helpless, with the fight raging above him. In the ghastly moment of shocked inaction which gripped him, he heard the crash as the first charge of the battering ram struck the barricade. Shouts, the tramp of running feet, the barking discharge of revolvers sifted down to him hollowly.

HE wiggled his foot. The pain of it brought tears to his eyes, but his lips became hard, invisible lines, and he tugged again. The heel of his foot lifted a little, and the timbers creaked as they settled down on the heel of his boot. Then, slowly, his foot came out of the boot.

Judging from the stabbing shock of pain when he stood erect, there was a bone broken, but he limped ahead in the pitch darkness, catching at the stacked barrels for support. Then he drew the second boot off.

His mind was working furiously. Somewhere in this black hole was the bottom of Jade Callison's secret exit. But where, and how to find it? He dared not strike a light. Yet—Stub Sheridan chuckled grimly. Perhaps that was the solution.

He guessed that he had worked his way fifty feet or more into the cellar. Nearing the center of it, probably. He lay on his back on the floor and struck a big-headed sulphur match on a barrel above him.

As it sputtered alight, a gun blasted from a spot at right angles from the course he had followed. Sheridan's own gun boomed out, firing at the muzzle flash, twice and then again. No more shots came from the darkness.

"Shore," said Sheridan to himself, "he'd be bound tuh leave a guard at the bottom of it."

He went forward boldly, but with his Colt in front of him. There was a chance that the fellow was shamming, but it had to be taken. Time was short. He could hear the battering-ram jamming into the barricade, bashing through it.

The guard, he found when he stumbled over him, was dead. By the light of another match, he shoved aside a row of empty casks stacked against the wall. The flimsy door behind them was locked, but he jerked hard at the handle and it splintered open.

Up the narrow stairway he went, his stockinged feet noiseless on the smooth wood. It was utterly black, and there was no light at the top. He stumbled on, one hand groping before him.

The strident sound of breaking wood mingled with the hard roar of voices surged up to him, and he knew that the barricade had crumbled. He pictured the furious fighting which must be taking place at the opening and swore because his broken foot would allow him no greater speed.

He came out on a level landing and paused for a breathless instant to shove fresh shells into his gun.

The firing from below him tapered off, stopped. Then, so close that it made him jump, Jade Callison's guttural voice screamed out: "Hold it, boys! There's two scatter-guns trained on those stairs! If you make a move for 'em, I'll wipe out a dozen of you."

There was a pause, tense and pregnant with nearing disaster.

"Back, I say!" roared Callison. "I'm asking safe conduct out of Bear Paw with a pack horse. Me and Dodgeson go. You can have the gun scum. You'll get the girl when I'm clear. Otherwise she dies." Jade Callison, with his outlaw empire toppling, was making his last desperate play.

The girl's voice cut clearly through to

Sheridan. "Don't try it, Dad! He'll kill you just as he says. I'll go with him." Her tone rose to a shriek. *"Don't try it!"*

THEN Stub Sheridan had hurled his broad shoulders against the panel. It swung open easily, sprawling him on the floor. For the barest instant the sudden light was like a sheet of flame lashing into his eyes, but he was out of line of the direct reflection and the effect of it passed swiftly. His momentary blindness was balanced by the stunning surprise of his sudden appearance in the room.

Stub Sheridan rolled on his shoulders as he fell. He came up like a cat with the easy grace which was so much a part of him, and hung there in the middle of the room, crouching so low that he looked like a dwarf.

The scene in the oak-paneled office flashed over his vision with astounding clarity. It was like a wax tableau, and the expressions of the figures had the ludicrous, inadequate quality of wax dummies. Jade Callison and Dodge Dodgeson were kneeling by the slits in the further wall; shotguns were at their shoulders, but they had not yet fired; their heads were turned, incredulously, t o w a r d Sheridan. Sally Flynn was bound with ropes around her feet and shoulders to a chair. She was staring with unbelief, and by some odd quirk of values, Stub Sheridan noticed for the first time that her eyebrows were darker than her hair.

The immobility lasted only as long as the flash of darkness into light. Then the tableau exploded. The lean-shouldered Dodgeson flung himself away from Callison, snatching at the six-gun which lay beside him.

He leaped, landed, and bounded away again, his gun roaring as he moved. The gunman's nickname was honestly come by. He darted and whirled like a cornered rat, his weapon spitting flame. Twice Sheridan fired and twice his lead failed to down the man. It was incredible that Dodgeson, too, could miss at such close quarters, but he was moving so jerkily that his effectiveness was spoiled. Stub Sheridan's third bullet caught him in the stomach. He doubled up in mid-air and fell heavily, rolling over twice.

Though his ears were drumming from the roaring concussion of the shots, Sheridan heard faintly the warning scream of the girl.

Jade Callison, slower in motion and in his reaction to the situation, had moved ponderously during the interval. He had swung his scatter-gun away from the slit and was now training it on the ex-marshal. Through the drifting smoke, Sheridan saw the gaping muzzles centering on him.

He threw himself to the right, flipping a shot as he did so. It struck Callison; he could tell that by the sudden shivering of the man's huge body, but it did not stop him. One of the barrels belched flame. Most of the shots tore into the flooring, but the rest stung Sheridan's wrist, numbing it. His gun slipped from his grasp, skittered into the opposite corner.

Callison was sinkng slowly, as if his great stomach and torso had suddenly become too great a weight to bear up. But his flabby jowls were cuddled against the weapon as it followed Stub Sheridan who was lunging after his Colt.

SALLY FLYNN was coughing and choking from the acrid powder fumes which swirled in the little room. Her eyes were ghastly with horror as she followed that slowly moving gun barrel.

Callison settled down soggily into a sitting position. He clung desperately to the scatter-gun. The lids of his eyes dropped, shutting off those slim little canyons of blackness. The muzzle of the gun tilted slowly down until it rested on the floor. From his shirt front and his fingers the green jade glittered wickedly in the smoky yellow light.

Wearily Stub Sheridan got to his feet. "It's all right," he said. "He's dead."

He was cutting the ropes which held Sally Flynn when through the door from the stairs came plunging the men of Bear Paw who had manned the battering-ram. Great-chested, towering Christopher Flynn was in their lead.

Two days later, when wounds had be-

gun to heal and order had been restored in the town, the town council met again in its crude fire-blackened courthouse. Flynn was there, and Jeffrey Dukes with his bandaged shoulder, and Stub Sheridan. Sheridan had fainted there in Callison's office from the pain of his crushed heel and he had spent the intervening time in bed. He was up now, hobbling on a pair of improvised crutches.

Jeffrey Dukes, sitting at the table, his long black hair brushed for the first time since Sheridan had first met him, was covering a shining piece of metal with his hand.

"This town figures it kinda got off on the wrong foot far as you're concerned," he said. "We came damn' close to makin' a bad mistake."

Stub Sheridan shrugged. "That's nothin'. I went ahead an' really made a few."

"I reckon so," agreed Dukes, "but you ain't the only man that's dipped his pan in the wrong crick. We'd admire, Sheridan, to have you stick to this marshalin' job." He removed his hand from the badge and held it out to Sheridan. "Take it, boy. Bear Paw's solid behind you."

"There's nothin'," murmured Stub Sheridan, and his low voice had its old surge of power, "I'd admire more tuh do."

And without saying more, he hobbled into the street and headed for his restaurant.

He grinned as he pulled himself up on a stool. "Howdy, Red. How's yore ham an' eggs?"

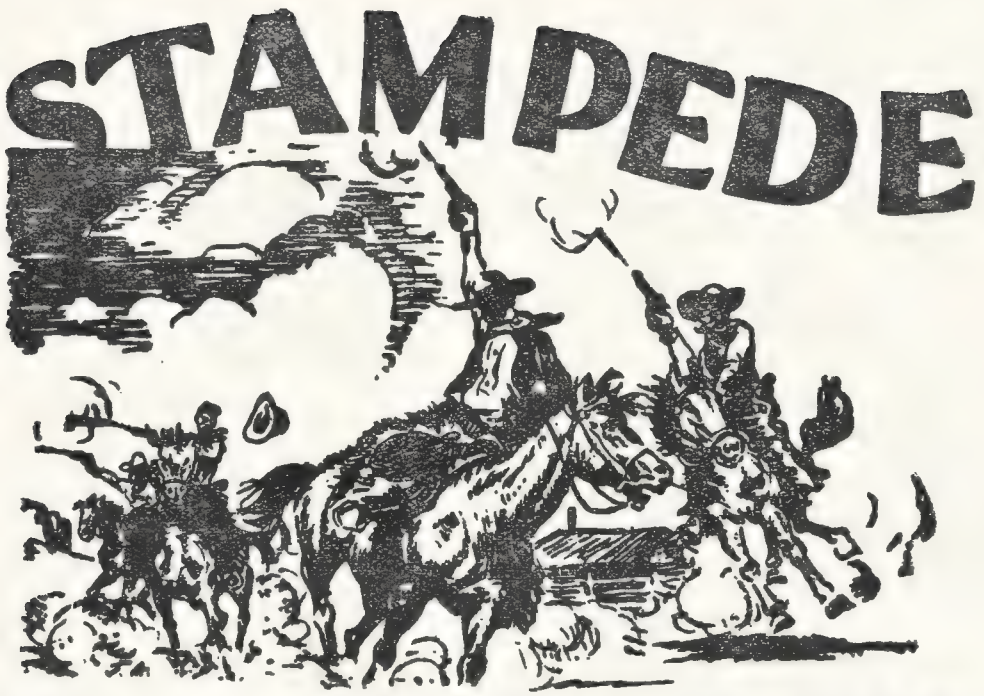
"Great," she told him this time without throwing anything, "but talkin' is still a dollar a minute."

"Red, yore fortune's made. I aim tuh go on talkin' to yuh the rest uh my life."

"As long," she told him with a twinkle in her eyes, "as you do more talkin' than faintin', it'll be all right. Up in Callison's office, I was just going to kiss you when you fell over like a brained ox. I almost decided then not to marry you."

"It wasn't weakness, it was love," grinned Stub Sheridan. "It sort uh dawned on me how much I loved yuh, an' I just keeled over. I still get kinda dizzy when I look at yuh."

And he reached over the counter and pulled her into his arms.



Where our reading and writing waddies get together with POWDER RIVER BILL

HOWDY, Hombres an' Hombresses. How do you-all like this issue—an' the 10,000 extra words? Yep. There's an extra novelet in this roundup. The range boss is sure tryin' to give you folks more for your money than you'll find on any other spread. Tell your friends 'bout this new W. T. plan. An' let Yores Trooley know how it stacks up with you.

Now I'll let one of you gents do some oratin'. Come on up, Dick. Tell us what happens when a rattler bites himself.

Dear Bill:

Just ran across a fairly interesting snake fact that I thought you and the WESTERN TRAILS readers might like to know. It's a pretty staid and popular belief that rattlesnakes are immune to their own venom. They can bite themselves—according to every story I ever heard—and not be the slightest bit affected.

Well, I found out this week that the belief is downright foolishness. In August 1932, two black-tailed rattlesnakes were induced to bite each other. In two hours one was dead. Six hours later, the other died. So much for that.

On August 11, 1933, a Texas diamondback rattler, enraged at being caught, flung around and bit himself in the tail, injecting his own venom into himself. Twenty-seven hours later, the varmint was buried, mighty, mighty dead.

And while we're on the subject of poison critters, let me tell you this one on a tarantula spider. It happened in South America. A native was lying on the ground, napping, when he felt something tickle his chest and woke up. He saw a tarantula on his chest. Afraid to even breathe, he just watched it. It played around for awhile and finally walked away. When he got up and killed it, his hair had turned absolutely white.

Say, Bill, if any of your readers have any savvy on freak two-headed snakes, I wish they'd let me in on it. I've been trying to get some real lowdown on two-headed rattlers.

RICHARD B. SALE.

Sure thing, Dick. If any of the folks hear of that two-headed varmit, they'll let us know. An' I figger that some jaspers will question that native's hair turning white in a few minutes. I've heard tell that in a cowboy-Injun ruckus that lasted all day, some of the cowboys rode off with white hair. Anyway, I'd sure like to hear 'bout that two-headed snake. Thanks for comin', Dick . . . .

An' here's Miss Patches, folks.

Rock Rapids,
Iowa.

Dear Old Bill:

I have just finished reading the latest WESTERN TRAILS magazine and was very pleased with the stories, especially Clyde A. Warden's. This is my first letter to *Stampede* and I hope I am welcome.

I am just a small-town girl, and am sweet sixteen. I am 5 ft. 5½ in. tall and have dark brown curly hair, blue-black eyes, and weigh 116 pounds. Anyone who didn't know me would think I came from the West, because I have dark skin. But I am only of German, French, Irish, and English decent. Isn't that quite a mixture? As a favor will you find me a black-curly-haired hombre for a Pen Pard?

ETHEL "PATCHES" HUSMANN.

P. S. Enclosed is my Tophand Authors Ballot of Western Trails.

I reckon that Pardner Pete will take care of that favor you asked. Jus' drop over to the Pen Pards bunkhouse an' sign up. An' thanks for the ballot. Don't be a stranger, Miss Patches . . . .

Me—Powder River Bill

WILL PAY ONE DOLLAR

for every hunk of interestin' information 'bout the West that is orated at comin' STAMPEDES.

If you-all send in stuff that ain't no good or has been orated before I'm gonna chuck it right back to you. An' if you don't send an addressed an' stamped envelope I'll chuck it in the basket. Savvy?

Mail everything to

STAMPEDE

WESTERN TRAILS

67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.

Meet up with Ralph. He's a great hand for cowboy songs.

409½ W. Domonick St.,
Rome, N. Y.

Dear Bill:

The W. T. Mag is the best that I have ever read. Bert Little and Duke Buckland are best. The others are good, too.

Now, Bill, I want to join the old *Stampede*. I want Pen Pards from all over the world. I will answer all letters. I am twenty-four, 5 ft. 11 inches tall, have black hair and eyes. Now, pals, come on and write to a lonesome fellow.

I am a great hand for cowboy songs and play the guitar, like to ride horseback, to go boating, swimming, like to read.

I hope to see this in the mag soon for I don't let W. T. get by me. I am sending the Tophand Ballot to you.

RALPH MASON.

Howdy, Ralph. Jus' take a look-see at Pardner Pete's Bunkhouse Bulletin. You'll find that Miss Loretta shares your interest in cowboy songs. Come again soon, Ralph. An' bring along some more ballots. *Gracias* . . . .

Miss Maxynne has a challenge for all you hombres. What are you gonna do, gents?

Fox Lake,
Wisconsin.

Dear Bill:

I am writing to you to ask you if you'd put my name in your list which you publish in the WESTERN TRAILS Magazine.

I will promise to write very interesting letters to those who write to me.

I wonder if you would publish that I don't believe I have ever seen a boy that really was good looking. Quite a few girls though. Perhaps you could get me some boy writers who always are bragging they are good looking, and perhaps I'll change my mind about seeing boys who are *rather* good looking. I'd also like to hear from girls, too.

I'll promise to send a framed photo of myself to the boy or girl who I think is the best looking by seeing their snapshots.

I have been a reader of your corner of the book for a long time and certainly enjoy it.

Oh! yes! I am eighteen years old, brunette, blue eyes, five foot seven inches tall, love sports and go nearly daffy over dances.

Please publish my request and I'll remain

Your friend,
MAXYNNE RING.

Well, Miss Maxynne, I reckon I'm plumb outta this handsome hombre contest. Me, they use my landscape to scare outlaw bronks. Let me know how you make out, friend . . . .

Shake with Junior, hombres an' hombresses. This gent is a collector. He'll tell you-all 'bout it. Step right up, Junior. We're a-lissenin'.

Marietta, Ga.
Route No. 1.

Dear Bill:

I am a constant reader of the W. T. Magazine, and I enjoy the stories in it very much. In the last issue I had a tough time with the ballot.

Bill, I am a collector. I collect photos of girls. A boy friend and I are racing

to see who can get the most snapshots.

So, Bill, tell all the single girls to throw their snapshots this way. I'll answer all letters, and send my photo as long as my supply lasts.

I am brown-eyed, have brown hair, five feet and eleven inches, weigh one hundred and thirty six pounds, and will soon be nineteen years of age. I am an outdoor boy mostly. I love the wide open spaces.

Bill, I hope this letter isn't too long. Wishing you lots of luck.

Your pal,
Junior.

W. J. JENKINS, Jr.

All right, Junior. The race is on. Pardner Pete will sign you up. But I warn you, jasper. That supply of your pictures better be big. Let Yores Trooley know how many pictures you have. An' how many your friend has. The folks here will be sure-nuff interested in your contest. Come again soon, *amigo* . . . .

From Canada comes Miss Evelyn. She would like cowboy an' cowgirl pards.

Minburn, Alberta.

Howdy Bill:

Here comes my ballot and as you see I am very fond of the Bert Little stories. And all the other stories are perfect as far as I can see. Bill ole dear, I would be very glad if you could help me find some Pen Pards by putting this letter in print.

As for a description, I am 5 feet 3 inches tall, weigh 112 lbs., and have brown wavy hair and blue eyes which are very ambitious when it comes to reading.

So come on you cowboys and cowgirls between ages from 15 to 20 and who are fond of dancing and riding horseback fill up my mailbox full.

With my very best wishes to the mag. and also its editor I remain, until old W. T. runs out of tune, your most faithful reader.

EVELYN JOHNSON.

P. S. Bill I sure would like a snapshot of yourself and I forgot to say I am 15 years old.

Sure I'll send one o' my pictures. But remember that you-all asked for it. An' thanks for the ear-music, friend . . . .

Make room for George, folks. He's been to the Hawaiian Islands, an' will tell Pen Pards 'bout 'em. Here's George.

120 N. Collage St.,
Myerstown, Pa.

Hello Bill:

How are the chances of getting in your old *Stampede?* I love excitement and that is where I would like to be.

Now I am not so good at writing but will try my best to make things interesting. I have crossed the continent twice and have also been in the Hawaiian Islands. So if there are any readers who would like to hear about the people of the Islands just let them write. They have some real cowboys over there, too. I am fond of the wide open spaces and love all sports, although I am not much of a dancer.

Inclosed you will find my ballot. Just because I do not mark them all is not because I do not like them, but because I just mark the ones that I think are the best. You know the best always comes first.

I am 24 years old, 5 ft. 11 in. weight 155 lbs., blue eyes, light brown hair, with plenty of freckles. So come on and write to me as I am very lonesome.

Sincerely,
GEO. MALL.

Chances are good, George. You're in! Folks who send along ballots are first served. Be seein' you . . . .

Miss Ethel will tell folks all 'bout the crackers an' cookies they eat. Here she is.

Wyland Hotel,
Kansas City, Mo.

Hello Everyone:

I am 21 years old, 5 ft. 1 in., 128 lbs. Have brown hair and eyes. Love dancing, swimming, reading, and the movies.

PARDNER PETE'S Bunkhouse Bulletin

Pen Pards who would like an ink sketch o' their snapshot, send it to—

DAVID JEROME
539 Brompton Place
Chicago, Illinois

Pen Pards who would like cowboy songs, write to—

Miss LORETTA LaBACHOTTE
Alameda and Buena Vista
Burbank, Calif.

—Also—

VICTOR MARKS
7127 S. Washtenaw Avenue
Chicago, Ill.

Pen Pards who would like poetry written 'bout their picture, send it to—

CHARLES J. HERBERT, JR.
c/o Victor St. James
Whittemore, Michigan

For the protection of our readers, WESTERN TRAILS *reserves the right to open all Pen Pard mail passing through our hands.*

At the present time I am working in a bakery. So if you have often wondered about the crackers or cookies you eat, just ask me. I can tell you most anything about them.

I want to hear from every one and will exchange photos.

I would like to know if Larry Taylor and Joe Whitney can still be reached by writing c/o Six Company, Inc., River Camp, Boulder City, Nevada?

I will be expecting to see the mailman come up to my door with a whole wagon of letters so don't fail me.

Sincerely,

ETHEL PAYNE,
c/o Arthur Payne.

That sure sounds interestin', Miss Ethel. As far as I can figger, you're the first baker member o' the *Stampede*. Greetin's to you an' your art. Yep—art. If anyone wants to start somethin' on that score, let 'em step up. Pardner Pete will take care o' you, Miss Ethel. Thanks for comin' . . . .

Stand up, hombres an' hombresses. Here's a lady you-all should meet—an' lissen to. Folks, the *Stampede* takes a heap o' pleasure in presentin' Mrs. Gerry.

2001 W. Harrison St.,
Chicago, Ill.

Dear Bill:

Will you make those kids hunker down over there somewhere and keep quiet and listen while Granma and Granpa have a say in just which way this *Stampede* is headed. Now those kids are always talking about what they are going to do. Youth lives in the future. Old age lives in the past. Now, Bill dear, this hombress would like some of the dear old hombres from 60 years on up to write to a hombress who has just arrived at Lonesome Ranch of Powder River.

I am very much interested in the *Stampede* and hope some of the dear old boys will write to me, for I sure would appreciate hearing from some of them.

Say, Bill, they don't print them any better than W. T. I have been reading W. T. for several years, but this is the first time I've written in. I am five feet 4 inches tall, auburn hair turning slightly gray, have dark blue eyes.

Please, Bill, for goodness sake don't let any of those donkies kick my letter in the wastebasket, for some day you may be lonesome just like me.

Sincerely yours,

MRS. F. I. GERRY.

It's sure good to hear from a hombress like you. Yes, siree. An' I figger that the ole boys will be plumb pleased. There are a heap o' them in this gang. If a donkey tried to kick your letter in the wastebasket, I'd let plenty o' daylight into his ornery hide. Jus' make yourself plumb to home. The place is yours . . . .

From England comes Miss Mollie. She would like to find some Pen Pards over here.

29, Madalen Terrace,
Bohemia Road,
Hastings, Sussex,
England.

Dear Bill:

I have been a reader of WESTERN TRAILS for a long time, and I think its great. I also like reading the *Stampede*.

Do you think you could find me some Pen Pards? Please. Although I live in quite a big town I get lonely sometimes. I will promise to answer any letters I may receive.

I am 19, brown hair and eyes. Weight 102 lbs., 5 ft. 3 inches tall. I like reading, writing and most sports.

I'll close now wishing your mag the best of luck.

Yours sincerely,

MOLLIE BENNETT.

P.S. Am enclosing ballot. Please print my letter, Bill.

Pardner Pete will sign you up, Miss Mollie. An' thanks for the ballot.

Meet Red, folks. He has some things to get off his chest. Let 'er rip, Red.

Stuart, Okla.,
R. R. No. 1.

Hello Bill:

This is Red Lewis from the Mistletoe State calling, and would like to enjoy the hospitality of your *Stampede*. As very few Oklahoma outlaws are showing up at the old stamping ground, I figured it was high time one expressed his opinion of WESTERN TRAILS.

From my point of view your mag is the best on the market. Although I have read only a few copies. My opinion of Bert Little, cannot be expressed. Bert is my idea of a man! He is always on the right side no matter what the odds may be. I like three things in my stories: West, romance and action. Bert has all three, and just the right amount of each. "Outlaws Three" was a humdinger.

Yeow! I had almost forgotten Walrus, and Wishbone. If they will forgive me, I may say they come next to Bert Little.

Now, Red is five feet seven and one-half inches, has red hair ,gray brown eyes, and is nineteen. Weighs 125. Some say good-lookin'. I have enclosed a Tophand Author's Ballot. Be sure to sign me on for I love the west. *Adios, amingo mio.*

WILMER (RED) LEWIS.

P.S. Don't disappoint me.

Glad to have you, Red. *Gracias* for the ear-music 'bout ole W.T. An' we're right pleased that you like Bert Little. If you have the chance tell us how you liked him in "Clan of the Coltmen" in this here

issue. Lissen, Red, why don't you send one of your pictures to Miss Maxynne who orated a couple o' minutes ago. She is on the look-out for good-lookin' hombres. Maybe you'll get that framed picture of her. If you do, tell us. We'll put your name up on Pardner Pete's Bulletin in big letters. So-long, *amigo* . . . .

Miss Mildred o' Baltimore would like to hear from gents who live along the border of Mexico and Texas. She will tell you-all 'bout it.

Weirton, W. Va.
General Delivery,

Dear Powder River Bill:

I've just read my first WESTERN TRAILS magazine. I surely enjoyed it. I am a great Western enthusiast.

I am a blonde, curly headed creature with big blue eyes. Am 5 ft. 7 in. tall. Would like to hear from the West and along the border of Mexico and Texas. I hope I don't find myself in the wastepaper basket. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snaps. So come on, you Western hombres, and cheer a lonely orphan girl. Wishing WESTERN TRAILS loads of luck. The best book on the market.

I remain,

MISS MILDRED CULLEN.

Yep. We'll sure put you down on Pardner Pete's list. An' I figger it's up to the Western gents to cheer you up. Let Yores Trooley know how you make out. An' thanks for the good word . . . .

Bert Rand has a few words to say 'bout Clyde Warden an' Fred Davis. Here goes.

45 Eastern Parkway,
Jersey City, N. J.

Dear Bill:

I just finished reading Clyde A. Warden's "Renegade Ranch," and Frederick C. Davis' "Death At Double Crossroads." I'm going to find some time now to read W.T. And after I looked over your *Stampede*, well, Bill, they can look the West over, and the East, too, and they could never find another man to do the good job you are doing. Keep it up, Bill, and the best of luck to you and W.T. I don't doubt that you have heard from clerks, cowhands, actors, so put another actor, writer, poet, on your list. To the young man who gave me my first W.T. I'm going to give a year's subscription of W.T. for Xmas. How's that, Bill? He came to me and said, "Bert, you like Western pictures, and Western dramas on the radio. Here is a book, and a story I would like you to read," I told him I did not have the time, but he would not take NO for an answer, so I took the book home, and from now on W.T. for me.

You see, Bill, I have a studio here, and this time of the year I am busy writing up scripts for plays, musical comedies, etc., but I will find the time to read your book always, and I am going to pass the good word along to many friends.

I am a young man, single, 30 years, brown hair, good eyes, 5 ft. 10½, weigh 135. I would like to hear from some of the French people in this country, I am American, but born of French parents.

So come girls and boys. I will send you a photo, if you send me one of you.

Until we hear from you again, Bill, good luck, pard, and the best of health to you, and W.T.

Au revoir,

BERT RAND.

P.S. Enclosed you will find my ballot, Bill.

Well, Bert, I sorta figger that friend o' yours is plumb lucky. The range boss jus' told me that there are some mighty fine stories comin' up for you folks. Warden, Davis, Ford, Verzani, Archibald, an' a heap o' others. That's a right nice present, Bert. Good luck to you, *amigo*.

Get set for the chuck now, folks. My ole pard, Dishpan Charlie, is gettin' ready to serve up his flapjacks. But before we pitch in, we'll take a look-see at this here ballot. Jus' mark a "1"—"2"—"3"—"4"—an' so on in the empty box beside the author's name. An' bear in mind that Pen Pards who send in ballots with their letters will be first served.

Adios, amigos.

Tophand Author's Ballot

WESTERN TRAILS
67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.

T. W. FORD *The Fear Trail*	
JOE ARCHIBALD *Bronc Bait*	
CLYDE A. WARDEN *Clan of the Coltmen*	
FREDERICK C. DAVIS *Trigger Trumps*	
ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY *Hellion's Law*	

Name .....

Address .....

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My famous course trains you right in your own home—gets you ready for one of the good ground jobs—or cuts many weeks and many dollars from flight instructions. Send for my big free book today.

Don't sit back and envy the men who are in the midst of the romance, adventure and fascination of Aviation. YOU DON'T HAVE TO. For right in your own home, in your spare time, I'll give you the training you need to get started in this growing, well-paid industry. Get my free book. It tells *all* the facts.

Many Make $40, $60, $75 a Week

Through the amazingly simple method I have worked out, I can train you at home to fill many well-paid jobs in Aviation. Naturally, before you can fly, you have to take additional instruction in a plane. Even on that instruction I save you time and money. But when you graduate from my course you have the necessary foundation to fill any one of the many interesting, well-paid ground jobs. Many of my graduates quickly get into jobs paying $40, $60 to $75 a week. Others, with the additional low cost flying instruction I arrange for, become pilots at $300 a month or better.

Aviation Is Growing Fast

Get into Aviation now—when you are still getting in on the ground floor of a new industry—when you have a chance to forge ahead without having to displace lots of older men. Aviation is a young man's industry, where young men earn real money. The President of the biggest air line in the World is only 35 years old. Most famous pilots are in their early thirties, or even younger. It is a young man's industry, which means that there are plenty of opportunities to forge ahead. But just because it is run by young men, don't get the idea that Aviation is a small business. Millions are being spent yearly to develop and improve airways and planes. Thousands of men earn good livings from the business. And many, many thousands will enter it in the future. It is a great and growing industry, this Aviation, an industry that still brings romance, excitement, thrills—even while it is bringing big opportunities and good pay.

Here are just a few of the many well-paid jobs in the fast growing Aviation Industry:

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Airport Superintendent
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Electrician
Shop Foreman
Hangar Crew Chief
Traffic Manager
Purchasing Agent
Aerial Mail Clerk
Motor Expert
Radio Operator
Airplane Mechanic
Field Work

IN THE AIR

Air Express Agent
Air Mail Pilot
Aerial Photography
Airport Manager
Test Pilot
Aerial Passenger Agent
Private Piloting
Weather Observer
Flight Instructor
Commercial Pilot
Field Manager
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Walter Hinton, Pres.
Aviation Institute
Washington, D. C.

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Mr. Walter Hinton, President 937-A
Aviation Institute of U. S. A., Inc.
1115 Connecticut Avenue, Washington, D. C.

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(Print clearly)

Address.....Age.....

City.....State.....

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4. **Station Group Locator;**
5. **Simplified Tuning Guide Lights;**
6. **Automatic Select-O-Band Indicator;**
7. **Illuminated Pointer Indicator;**
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Middletown, O.—Here are some of the stations I have heard: EAQ, Madrid, Spain—DJB, Lecien, Germany—GSB, GSF, Daventry, England—VK3ME, Melbourne, Australia—VE2ME, Sydney, Australia—HJ2ABA, HJ4ABE, HJ5ABF, Colombia, S. A., and many more. Gerben Hatfield, 2202 Grand Avenue.

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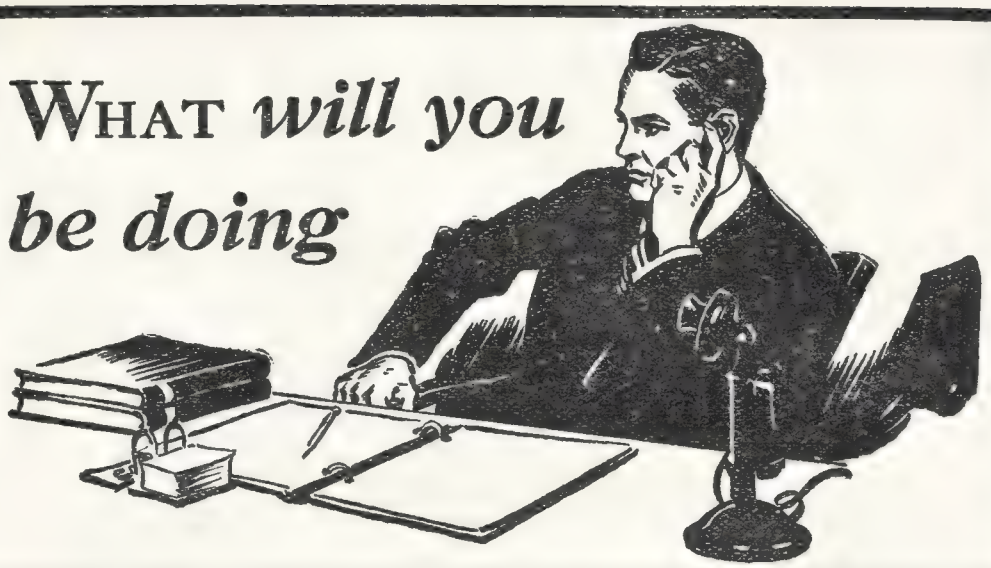

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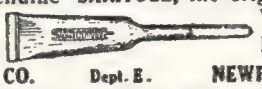

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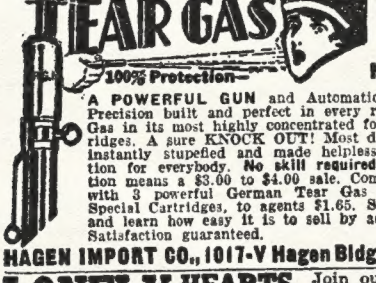

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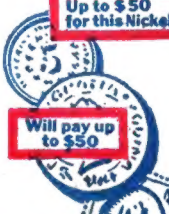

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